

Title: Women's Rugby World Cup 2025 – Programme and Opening Match
Report of: Rob Hamilton, Head of Innovation and Strategy
Portfolio: Culture, Creative, Tourism and Sport

Report Summary

The purpose of this report is to request approval to provide a funding contribution towards the Women's Rugby World Cup 2025 – Programme and Opening Match in Sunderland.

In November 2024, the North East Combined Authority (North East CA) Cabinet resolved to allocate funding to invest in improving community participation in upcoming major regional sporting events, providing a test case for the Region of Sport concept. Cabinet delegated responsibility to the Chief Executive in accordance with the Single Assurance Framework to make investment decisions in relation to the funding allocated: a. £0.5m to support delivery of the inaugural match at the Women's Rugby World Cup 2025 in Sunderland, including a comprehensive programme of community engagement and legacy benefit, testing the principles of the Region of Sport.

This report includes one project requesting a total of £500,000 investment funding.

Recommendations

The Chief Executive is recommended to:

- i. approve the following funding award, and authorise entry into required agreements to facilitate approvals, as set out in this report:
 - A total of £500,000 of investment funding to be awarded to Sunderland City Council to deliver the Women's Rugby World Cup 2025 – Programme and Opening Match.
- ii. authorise the Director of Finance and Investment and Monitoring Officer to prepare the necessary documentation and enter into contract with the lead applicants (Sunderland City Council).

A. Context

1. Background

- 1.1 Sunderland City Council in conjunction with the WRWC 25 organisation will deliver the Opening Game of the Women's Rugby World Cup 2025 at the Stadium of Light, a general moment for global rugby, shaping positive perceptions at all levels of the game and championing gender equality.
- 1.2 Leading up to the main event will be a programme of activities to maximise awareness and engagement across communities, schools, and clubs in the region.
- 1.3 The game and engagement programme will be a launchpad for a long-lasting legacy, showcasing the region's ability to host a global event and contributing to the aims of the NE Region of Sport ambition, to be a region where community participation, women and girls' participation, visitor numbers, investment and public health and wellbeing outcomes are improved through sport.

2. The Investment Proposal

- 2.1 The Opening Game: England vs. USA - on 22 August 2025, Sunderland will host the opening game of the Women's Rugby World Cup at the Stadium of Light, welcoming an audience of 40,000+ spectators. This historic match builds a compelling case for establishing the North East as a "Region of Sport." As the only opening game of a World Cup to be held outside recognised national stadiums,

it represents an unparalleled opportunity to showcase Sunderland and the North East region. The match will be broadcast globally to over 50 million viewers, including an estimated 14 million in the UK, alongside 3.7 million digital viewers. It is forecast to generate 70 million social media engagements throughout the tournament. The estimated local economic impact is expected to exceed £10 million, with more than 10,000 spectator bed nights anticipated. World Rugby has already booked 15,000 premium bed nights across the NECA region to accommodate teams, supporters and over 200 match officials.

- 2.2 Rugby Accessibility and Multi-Generational Impact - A comprehensive programme will be launched across Sunderland and the NECA region to:
- Accelerate awareness and accessibility of rugby for women and girls.
 - Deliver a multi-generational impact programme, fostering long-term participation in sport.

- 2.3 Increase Participation in Sport - The initiative will:
- Encourage greater participation in sport, particularly from women, girls, and underrepresented groups, leading to improved health and wellbeing outcomes.
 - Drive engagement with local rugby clubs, focusing on integrating individuals who have never been involved in the sport.

- 2.4 Welcome Ceremony - on 16th August 2025, a Welcome Ceremony will be hosted at Sunderland City Hall for the England and USA teams. This event, broadcast globally, will serve as the first official event of the 2025 World Cup, providing a unique platform to showcase Sunderland and the region.

- 2.5 Community Engagement - A variety of community engagement activities will take place from March 2025, including:
- A Rugby Fanzone at the Beacon of Light for local schools and rugby clubs on 8th March 2025, coinciding with Sunderland's game against Cardiff City. Activities include tag rugby and health advice.
 - The Women's Rugby World Cup Trophy will visit:
 - The LGBTQIA+ Hadrian's Cup at Kingston Park, featuring 20 teams and 2,000 spectators.
 - Durham University's 150th celebration game against the Barbarians on 3rd May 2025 at the Racecourse Ground, attended by 5,000 spectators.

- 2.6 World-Class Fan Experience - Sunderland will deliver a 3-day world-class fan experience in the city centre across Thursday 21, Friday 22 (day of the opening game) and Saturday 23 August 2025. This includes:
- A fan village expected to host 20,000 visitors over three days.
 - An Opening Ceremony of international calibre, designed to leave a lasting impression on both attendees and viewers.
 - A free, celebratory event across the Stadium of Light and the city centre following the game.

To accommodate the influx of spectators, hotels across the region will be utilised. The event aims to enhance Sunderland's and the region's reputation as a host for major events, building momentum for the Region of Sport aspiration. All events will promote inclusivity, encourage the increased participation of women in sport, and enhance the North East's profile as a vibrant region to live, work, study and engage in sport.

- 2.7 Community Engagement and Participation Programme - from March to July 2025, the Newcastle Rugby Foundation, in collaboration with the RFU, Durham RFU, and Northumberland RFU, will deliver a community programme targeting 11-14-year-olds in specific deprived areas (based on Index of Multiple Deprivation) and from minority groups. Key objectives include:
- Improving health and well-being through increased physical activity.
 - Engaging sedentary and isolated audiences in sport.

This programme will act as a test case for demonstrating how community and school participation linked to major events can drive long-term change and engagement.

- 2.8 Diverse Activities Across the Region - The local programme will include:

- Schools and club activities.
- Rugby coaching and mass participation weekends.
- Beach festivals, touch rugby, and corporate touch rugby at the fanzone.

- 2.9 Celebrating Regional Heritage and Historic Connections - In collaboration with two project delivery partners, the National Trust and Community Opportunities, the programme will highlight the region's historic connections with the USA through Washington and Hylton Castle, aiming to attract additional visitors and bed nights.
- 2.10 Volunteer Engagement - the event will involve recruiting and training a volunteer and wayfinding team of over 300 individuals, ensuring smooth delivery and community involvement. The volunteer programme will be delivered by a contractor (tbc) with recruitment and training starting from April 2025. *(The procurement relating to volunteer engagement has gone live via the OPEN portal w/c 17 February 2025 with an anticipated award date of 13 March 2025).*
- 2.11 ChildFund Programme - the associated charity ChildFund will facilitate a programme enabling 70 international students to experience the North East, further enhancing the global reach and cultural exchange facilitated by the event.
- 2.12 Legacy Impact and Forward Plan - the community activities and engagement programmes are made possible by the opportunity to host the opening game and ceremony of the 2025 Women's Rugby World Cup. These efforts will deliver key outcomes as follows:
- Cement the North East's ambition to become a Region of Sport.
 - Showcase the area's capability to deliver transformational events.
 - Create a lasting legacy and a stronger regional profile on the global stage.

Wider benefits and impacts of the proposal will be as follows:

- Increased participation in sport and rugby specifically among women and girls in particular.
- Improved health and wellbeing outcomes
- Increased business and employment opportunities
- Increased footfall and visitor spend
- Legacy benefits to the region resulting in follow-on events, activities and investment.

The following evidence draws on a House of Lords Library Briefing, *Contribution of sport to society and the economy*, published in May 2024.

- 2.13 Appropriate branding is included as a standard contractual requirement for all North East CA investments.

3. Outputs and Outcomes

Outputs	2025/26
Number of residents participating in a sports activity	11,900
Number of schools receiving support	50
Number of cultural / tourism events taking place	30

Description of Outcomes	Timeframe for achievement	Totals
Residents supported into volunteering	30/09/2025	235
Number of attendees participating in a cultural tourism event	30/09/2025	30,000

4. Timetable for Implementation

Milestone	Forecast Date
Proposal Start Date	26/11/2024
Procurement	28/02/2025

Engagement commences	01/04/2025
Steering Group (+project/working groups)	26/03/2025
Steering Group (+project/working groups)	07/05/2025
Steering Group (+project/working groups)	18/06/2025
Steering Group (+project/working groups)	23/07/2025
Steering Group (+project/working groups)	13/08/2025
Event Delivery	21-23/08/2025
Financial Completion Date	31/12/2025
Anticipated Proposal Completion Date (date by which all outputs/outcomes will have been achieved)	31/03/2026

5. Evaluation

5.1 An evaluation will be delivered by the organisers of the Women's Rugby World Cup 2025.

6. Appraisal

6.1 The appraisal of the business case provided by the applicant has been assessed and is rated GREEN on all aspects.

6.2 Pre-Contract Conditions

Number	Pre-Contract Condition
1	Applicant to provide match funding confirmation
2	Output and outcome totals to be revisited and confirmed prior to contracting

6.3 RAG Assessment

Overall RAG Assessment		
Risk Rating	Strategic case	Green
	Commercial case	Green
	Economic case	Green
	Financial case	Green
	Management case	Green
	Overall Rating	Green

6.4 Recommended Conditions of Funding

The award of funding would be subject to the following proposed funding condition.

No.	Condition
1.	<p>The Recipient confirms that it will not receive any economic advantage for its role in the Project. Any such advantage will flow through to the Project beneficiaries i.e. the individuals receiving support under the Project. The Recipient shall operate the Project on a not-for-profit basis.</p> <p>a. To ensure compliance with condition 1, the Recipient confirms that any of its costs claimed from North East CA for delivery of the Project (whether attributable to management, delivery, labour costs or otherwise) shall be remunerated strictly in accordance with market conditions. At the end of delivering the Project, the Recipient will be required to account to North East CA for any residual advantage it has obtained through the Funding.</p>

	b. Pursuant to condition 1, the Recipient agrees that it shall collect appropriate information to demonstrate that it has received no such economic advantage from the Funding (which shall be supplied to the North East CA upon request).
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A. Potential Impact on North East Combined Authority Objectives

1	Develop a comprehensive community engagement programme with key milestones throughout to generate interest and promote awareness and engagement in the WRWC 2025.	<p>Develop and implement a comprehensive engagement programme with clear milestones designed to build awareness, interest, and participation in the Women's Rugby World Cup 2025 throughout Sunderland and the wider region.</p> <p>Achieve a minimum of 3,000 participants across all programme activities, with at least 50% of attendees being new to rugby, and secure engagement from 50 schools, as well as local businesses, and community organisations.</p> <p>Partner with local rugby clubs, schools, community groups, and businesses to deliver a series of events, including coaching clinics, promotional campaigns, and fan-zone activities, leveraging existing resources and networks.</p> <p>Align the programme with Sunderland's goal of becoming a sporting destination, North East Combined Authority's strategic priorities and Region of Sport ambition, and the Women's Rugby World Cup legacy aspirations.</p> <p>Roll out the programme in phases, starting with awareness campaigns from April 2025, leading to school and community activities, culminating in pre-event fan engagement activities by August 2025.</p>
2	Plan and deliver a transformational and successful event to showcase the opening match.	<p>Deliver a transformational and successful event for the inaugural match of the Women's Rugby World Cup 2025 in Sunderland, showcasing the city's ability to host world-class sporting events and creating an unforgettable experience for all attendees.</p> <p>Achieve a maximum capacity stadium attendance of 25,000 generating c. £10m in economic impact for the local economy, and secure coverage from at least national and international media outlets.</p> <p>Leverage partnerships between Rugby World Cup organisers, Sunderland City Council, local businesses, and community stakeholders to ensure seamless event planning, promotion, and execution, utilising Sunderland's proven event-hosting capabilities.</p> <p>Align the event delivery with the strategic priorities of Sunderland and the North East Combined Authority, to support economic growth, community engagement and cohesion, and establish the region as a hub for global sporting events.</p> <p>Deliver all aspects of the event, including pre-match fan zones, live broadcasts, and local cultural programming, by August 2025 ensuring post-event reporting and evaluation are completed by March 2026.</p>
3	Create a forward/action plan that will drive	Create a legacy programme linked to the Women's Rugby World Cup 2025 opening game in Sunderland, which strengthens the North East Combined Authority's (North East CA) case for becoming a Region of

	<p>increased participation in sport, create healthier outcomes and lead to future events of a similar scale to secure a Region of Sport legacy for the North East.</p>	<p>Sport by demonstrating long-term benefits in participation, economic impact, infrastructure development and healthier outcomes for key beneficiary groups.</p> <p>Increase rugby participation in the NECA region during 2025/26 (from a baseline position in 2024/25 measured via club memberships and school engagement programmes). Generate £10 million in regional economic impact, and secure commitments to host three additional major sporting events within five years.</p> <p>Collaborate with North East CA, local authorities, rugby clubs, schools, and community organisations to deliver a sustainable legacy plan, including new youth programmes, improved sporting infrastructure, and tourism campaigns highlighting the region as a sporting destination and Region of Sport.</p> <p>Align with North East CA 's strategic priorities for economic growth, community wellbeing, and cultural development, ensuring the event provides a platform to advocate for the region's sporting excellence and infrastructure capabilities.</p> <p>Launch key legacy initiatives alongside the Women's Rugby World Cup opening game in August 2025 and achieve measurable impacts by March 2026 to support the Region of Sport bid</p>
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C. Key risks

The risks associated with this proposal will be fully considered through the Combined Authorities Assurance Framework and will be set out in full at the point funding decisions are requested.

D. Financial and other resources implications

The recommendations of this report result in the following funding commitments by the North East Combined Authority.

Funding source	2025/26	Total
North East CA Investment Fund (£)	£500,000	£500,000
Private Sector Leverage (£)	£427,568	£427,568
Total (£)	£927,568	£927,568

E. Legal implications

The comments of the Monitoring Officer have been incorporated into the body of the report.

F. Equalities implications

The North East CA complies with the Public Sector Equality duty and is conscious of the need to achieve objectives set out under s149 of the Equality Act 2010. In June 2024 the North East CA adopted equality objectives to reflect the different roles of the Combined Authority as an employer, a commissioner and deliverer of services, and a civic leader.

G. Consultation and engagement

Consultation has been undertaken with the Chief Executive, the Mayor and the Cabinet Member for Culture, Creative, Tourism and Sport portfolio, and with Local Authority officers.

H. Appendices

None

I. Background papers

<https://www.northeast-ca.gov.uk/governance/cabinet>

J. Contact officers

Name: Lesley Strickland

Title: Senior Economic Development and Regeneration Officer – Tourism, Sport & Events Lead

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K. Glossary

North East CA	North East Combined Authority
WRWC	Women's Rugby World Cup
SCC	Sunderland City Council
NE	North East
FY	Financial Year

L. Consultee

Cabinet Member:	Director/Head of Service:	Director of Finance and Investment:	Monitoring Officer:
Yes/No	Yes	Yes	Yes