

Title BBC Radio 1 Big Weekend Sunderland 2026
Report of: Phil Witcherley, Director of Economic Growth and Innovation
Portfolio: Culture, Creative, Tourism and Sport

Report Summary

The purpose of this report is to request approval to provide a funding contribution of £495,000 towards the BBC Radio 1 Big Weekend Sunderland 2026.

The City of Sunderland has been selected to host BBC Radio 1 Big Weekend Sunderland, taking place in May 2026. This proposal will see Sunderland host a significant major cultural event using BBC Radio 1 Big Weekend's national and international profile as a catalyst for long-term benefit. Alongside delivering Radio 1's Big Weekend Sunderland 2026, the event will deliver a regional fringe and skills programme, and create a shared learning model — ensuring inclusive community engagement, delivering stronger cultural capacity, and creating a lasting legacy for Sunderland and the wider North East.

Recommendations

The Chief Executive is recommended to approve the following funding award, and authorise entry into the required funding agreement, as set out in this report:

- A total of £495,000 from the North East CA Investment Fund to be awarded to Sunderland City Council to deliver BBC Radio 1 Big Weekend Sunderland 2026.

A. Summary of Investment Proposal (Context)

The City of Sunderland has been selected to host BBC Radio 1 Big Weekend in May 2026. In addition to investment by the BBC, the project costs total £975,000 of which it is proposed that £495,000 will be provided by the North East CA. This proposal will see Sunderland host a significant major cultural event using the BBC Radio 1 Big Weekend's national and international profile as a catalyst for long-term benefit. Alongside delivering the BBC Radio 1 Big Weekend Sunderland 2026 the project will deliver a regional fringe and skills programme, and create a shared learning model — ensuring inclusive community engagement, delivering stronger cultural capacity, and creating a lasting legacy for Sunderland and the wider North East.

1. Background

- 1.1 Sunderland and the wider North East have undergone significant cultural and economic transformation in recent years, with increasing recognition of the creative and visitor economy as key drivers of growth. However, the region continues to face challenges such as socio-economic inequalities, creative sector fragility, and underinvestment in cultural infrastructure and participation.
- 1.2 While Sunderland has demonstrated its capacity to host large-scale cultural events (e.g. Women's Rugby World Cup 2025), and a growing creative offer, the North East does not have such a strong external perception as a cultural destination, compared to cities like Manchester, Liverpool, and Glasgow.
- 1.3 Venues such as Herrington Country Park require investment to improve accessibility and infrastructure so that they can be used for regular major event hosting. BBC Radio 1 Big Weekend Sunderland 2026 offers a rare opportunity to address these challenges through a high-profile event

that combines immediate impact (visitor economy, national exposure) with long-term investment in infrastructure, skills, and sector growth.

1.4 Need for the Intervention

Strengthening the North East's Cultural & Creative Economy

- Sunderland is seeking to diversify its economy, including by building it's the creative and cultural sector.
- BBC Radio 1 Big Weekend Sunderland 2026 will deliver a major cultural showcase, positioning Sunderland and the North East as a destination for large-scale national and international events.

Addressing Audience & Industry Gaps

- The growth of digital infrastructure and 5G technology presents an opportunity to deliver a dynamic series of events leading up to BBC Radio 1 Big Weekend Sunderland 2026.
- The music and live events sector are evolving post-pandemic, with an increasing need for digitally enabled, immersive, and accessible experiences.

Reinforcing Sunderland's Music and Smart City status

- Sunderland has been investing in 5G infrastructure, positioning itself as a national leader in digital connectivity.
- BBC Radio 1 Big Weekend Sunderland 2026 will serve as a high-profile demonstration of Sunderland's capabilities and *Music City* status.

Demand for the Proposed Activity

National & Regional Audience Demand

- Research indicates a growing demand for digitally enhanced cultural events that blend live and virtual experiences.
- Major UK cities have successfully leveraged similar initiatives to drive visitor numbers, tourism revenue, and investment (e.g., Preston, Dundee, Liverpool and Luton). The net positive direct economic impact for Luton was estimated at £5.1m and for Dundee £2.9m. The total economic impact and benefits for local businesses were much greater.
- BBC Radio 1 Big Weekend Sunderland 2026 taps into rising consumer expectations for high-tech, interactive musical experiences - a trend accelerated by changing audience behaviours.

Industry Demand & Strategic Fit

- Industry leaders in music, tech, and digital events will be drawn to the region to experience the fringe event programme and BBC Radio 1 Big Weekend Sunderland 2026.

Economic Impact & Investment Attraction

- Large-scale cultural events and music festivals have been shown to drive economic regeneration, boost tourism, and create jobs.
- The project's multi-venue strategy will deliver widespread benefits across the city and region, activating local businesses, hospitality, and retail.
- The technology-driven nature of BBC Radio 1 Big Weekend Sunderland 2026 will make Sunderland and the North East region a compelling location for future major cultural, music and sports events of this scale.

2. **The Investment Proposal**

2.1 The Investment Proposal outlines an ambitious, regionally significant programme to host a nationally and internationally acclaimed major event in Sunderland positioning the city and the North East as a dynamic and vibrant cultural hub and world-class host of major events. The project will go beyond delivering a single high-profile event by embedding:

- A wider engagement programme to boost cultural participation, deliver creative sector training, and provide inclusive opportunities for communities.

- Infrastructure investment at Herrington Country Park to enhance event capacity, safety, and accessibility for BBC Radio 1 Big Weekend Sunderland 2026 and ensure long-term use for future major events.
- A fringe cultural festival showcasing local talent and bringing cultural activity to diverse audiences.
- A shared learning and best-practice model to build regional expertise in hosting world-class events.

Key activities include:

- **Flagship Event**
 - A 3-day, nationally and internationally broadcast festival attracting ~80,000+ visitors.
 - High quality event production and programming, delivered by the nationally acclaimed Event Organiser and supported by Sunderland City Council.
- **Herrington Country Park Infrastructure Upgrades**
 - Investment in site improvements such as transport links and accessibility infrastructure to enable safe delivery of BBC Radio 1 Big Weekend Sunderland 2026 and future large-scale events.
 - Long-term enhancements to create a flexible, sustainable venue for cultural, sporting, and community activities.
- **Fringe Cultural Programme**
 - A week-long schedule of free and ticketed cultural events across regional venues, designed to engage local audiences and highlight regional talent.
- **Creative Sector Development and Skills Programme**
 - Masterclasses and career pathway sessions for creatives and young people in event management, music production, digital content creation, and cultural entrepreneurship (Create Talent Programme objective: sector-specific technical training in music, screen, writing and publishing – linking directly to skills alignment; shared target groups).
 - Large-scale recruitment of regional volunteers to provide transferable skills and create pathways to employment (Create Talent Programme objective: clear employment pathways, outreach to underrepresented groups – linking shared focus on progression and inclusion).
 - Direct engagement with schools, colleges, and universities through workshops, careers talks, and participatory activities (Create Talent Programme objective: regional outreach, flexible learning, community engagement – linking potential joint delivery and signposting).
- **Shared Learning Model**
 - Evaluation and knowledge-sharing framework to document lessons learned, providing a replicable model for future regional event hosting (Create Talent Programme objective: performance management, best practice sharing – linking BBC Radio 1 Big Weekend Sunderland 2026 legacy can inform Create Talent's ongoing improvement).

3. Outputs and Outcomes

Outputs	25/26	26/27	Total
Number of cultural / tourism events taking place	0	13	13

Outcomes	25/26	26/27	Total
Residents supported into volunteering	0	50	50
Increase in GVA/productivity	0	£3,700,000	£3,700,000
Number of attendees participating in a cultural tourism event	0	100,000	100,000

4. Timetable for Implementation

Milestone	Forecast Date
Proposal Start Date	01/11/2025
Infrastructure / accessibility works completed	21/05/2026
Fringe events completed	21/05/2026
Anticipated Proposal Completion Date (date by which all outputs / outcomes will have been achieved)	31/08/2026
Financial Completion Date	31/10/2026

5. Evaluation

- 5.1 As part of the proposal a Shared Learning and Legacy Model (key activity) will:
- Capture lessons from planning, infrastructure, delivery, and community engagement to create a transferable toolkit for future event hosting in the North East.
 - Publish a best practice report/toolkit; deliver regional workshops with North East CA member authorities; distribute findings to 50+ stakeholders.
 - Managed by an independent evaluation partner, supported by Sunderland City Council.
 - Builds on North East CA's framework for knowledge-sharing and evaluation.
 - Toolkit published within 5 months post-event.

6. Appraisal

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

Appraisal Summary – BBC Radio 1 Big Weekend Sunderland 2026

The business case for BBC Radio 1 Big Weekend Sunderland 2026 proposal is compelling and has been rated **GREEN** across all assessment areas, reflecting a strong and well-rounded submission. It is an ambitious project which aims to position Sunderland and the North East as a world-class cultural and events destination through a major international festival. This project includes infrastructure upgrades to Herrington Country Park, a fringe cultural programme, creative sector training, and development of a shared learning model for future activity. Delivered by Sunderland City Council and partners, it will benefit young people, communities, and local businesses. Project activities include planning, delivery, and legacy phases, with regional and digital engagement to maximise impact of the May event, which will include 3 days of live performance at the main festival event supported by a week of fringe events.

6.2 Recommended Conditions of Funding

Pre-Contract Condition: Applicant to confirm source and actual value of match funding for this project.

The value of **£480,000** has been accepted for the appraisal but this is still to be confirmed.

Condition 1: The Applicant is to monitor delivery of the Cultural and Creative Sector Providers and Adhere to the Subsidy Control Act as noted within 4.10 UK Subsidy Control.

Condition 2: The North East CA to be involved in any key announcements, maximising branding opportunities and representation from the Culture, Creative & Sport and Comms teams as part of the BBC Radio 1 Big Weekend Sunderland 2026 core project team.

B. Potential Impact on North East Combined Authority Objectives

The Mayoral Manifesto, devolution deal and Interim Local Growth Plan recognise the benefits that events bring to the region – socially, economically and reputationally. The North East CA Corporate plan sets out an objective to establish a regional events programme.

BBC Radio 1's Big Weekend Sunderland 2026 directly supports the Mayoral objectives of 'a home to world-class sporting and cultural venues and events, underpinned by eclectic and fast-changing

grassroots creativity and energy’ as part of our new Corporate Plan. BBC Radio 1’s Big Weekend Sunderland 2026 therefore contributes to the following missions: ‘A home of real opportunity’ – ‘by growing our cultural and sporting sectors’; and, ‘A North East we are proud to call home’ – developing a ‘thriving creative economy’ and working to ‘establish and deliver a regional events and culture programme’.

C. Key risks

A full risk register is included in the business case. High-level risks comprise:

- Failure to deliver events in accordance with agreed budget and timescales
- Failure to adequately plan the required events and activities, will jeopardise the successful delivery within the timescales and budget
- Potential failure of funding streams
- Budget commitments exceed available funding
- Events are not delivered in accordance with agreed plan or key milestones are delayed
- Events are not designed and delivered with residents/attendees needs
- Reputational damage as events fail to resonate with attendees

D. Financial and other resources implications

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

Funding source	2025/26	2026/27	Total
North East CA Investment Fund Capital (£)	£260,000	£235,000	£495,000
North East CA Investment Fund Revenue (£)			
Total North East CA	£260,000	£235,000	£495,000
Recipient’s Funds Capital (£)		£125,000	£125,000
Recipient’s Funds Revenue (£)	£153,989	£201,011	£355,000
Total Match	£153,989	£326,011	£480,000

E. Legal implications

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

F. Equalities implications

The North East CA complies with 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. An Equalities Impact Assessment will be undertaken for the project and the implications of this will be considered in the project mobilisation and delivery stages.

G. Consultation and engagement

Consultation has been undertaken with Sunderland City Council, Director of Economic Growth & Regeneration, Chief Executive, Finance Director, North East Mayor at the North East CA.

H. Appendices

None

I. Background papers

None

J. Contact officers

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K. Glossary

BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
North East CA	North East Combined Authority
SCC	Sunderland City Council

L. Consultee

Cabinet Member:	Director/Head of Service:	Director of Finance and Investment:	Monitoring Officer:
Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes