

Title: Sunderland Year of Music
Report of: Phil Witcherley, Director of Economic Growth and Innovation
Portfolio: Home to a Growing and Vibrant Economy

A. Summary

The purpose of this report is to seek approval from the Chief Executive to approve an award of £100,000 to the Sunderland Music City Community Interest Company (CIC) for activities within Sunderland's Year of Music, a landmark cultural programme designed to spotlight the city's rich musical heritage, showcase its thriving contemporary scene, and shape an inspiring vision for the future.

North East CA funding will act as a catalyst for transformational impact. It will enable Sunderland to deliver a Year of Music, but also embed longer-term social, economic, and cultural benefits, driving inclusive growth and aligning directly with North East CA's regional ambitions.

Recommendations

The Chief Executive is recommended to:

- i. Approve the award of £100,000 of North East CA Investment Funds for the funding of specific, named events within the Year of Music Programme.
- ii. Authorise the Director of Finance and Investment and Monitoring Officer to prepare the necessary documentation and enter into a grant funding agreement with Sunderland Music City Community Interest Company.

1. Background

The draft North East Culture, Creative Industries and Sport Strategic Framework establishes a 10-year vision for culture, creativity, heritage and sport as central pillars of inclusive growth, opportunity and regional confidence. It reflects the Mayor's ambition to embed culture, creative industries and sport at the heart of the North East's economic contributors, as fundamental to the prosperity and health of our ambitious region. The region has a distinctive cultural identity and one of the fastest-growing creative industries bases in England, playing critical roles in regeneration, civic pride and town centre vitality, our individual and collective wellbeing, and tourism and inward investment. At the same time, however, participation and engagement in culture and sport remains uneven; creative and cultural employment can be insecure, and less accessible; and productivity and access to much-needed investment lag national averages.

The Sunderland Year of Music will catalyse economic growth, social benefits, and wider cultural development in Sunderland. It will serve as a place-based cultural change initiative to showcase the city's rich musical heritage, engage communities, whilst also helping to strengthen the local cultural ecosystem. By part-funding Sunderland's Year of Music through Investment Fund, North East CA will effectively:

- contribute to its devolved mandate to integrate culture into the region's growth and impact;
- leverage creative economies as engines for regeneration and community development; and,
- help to cement Sunderland's role as a creative and musical hub within both national and global networks, the latter through the Music Cities Network.

The Sunderland Year of Music will contribute to North East CA's Local Growth Plan priorities for the Culture and Creative sector. It is forecast that the Year of Music will substantially boost Sunderland's economy through job creation, increased tourism, higher local spending, and new investments. The overall project is focused on delivering an ambitious and transformative celebration designed to spotlight the city's rich musical heritage, showcase its thriving contemporary scene, and shape an inspiring vision for the future.

2. The Investment Proposal

The Sunderland Year of Music project, delivered through Sunderland Music City CIC, seeks funding to support a number of key events and activities as part of a year-long cultural programme aligned with North East CA's priorities. The overall Project launched in June 2025 with headline performances by Franz Ferdinand and Emeli Sandé, it has already delivered major events such as Summer Streets Festival, One City One Voice, National Mackem Day, and the Women's Rugby World Cup fanzone, attracting large audiences and national attention.

The North East CA invited the submission of an investment request, to ensure that the activity aligned with and contributed to the North East CA's Local Growth Plan. The £100,000 of investment set out in this report ensures that the Sunderland Year of Music provides a clear commitment to championing the full potential of the region, collaborating with partners and Local Authorities to create a better way of life by connecting communities, giving people the skills to succeed, and improving cultural accessibility for all. North East CA funding will specifically be used for the following activities:

New Communities Music Festival - A multi-venue festival across The Fire Station, Keel Square and community spaces, celebrating Sunderland's diverse cultural communities. The festival showcases musical traditions, fosters inclusion and social cohesion, and provides accessible platforms for community-based artists.

Music Against Child Poverty 2 (The Fire Station) - A fundraising concert focused on local musicians performing classic repertoire to raise funds and awareness for Love, Amelia, supporting ongoing efforts to address child poverty in Sunderland. North East CA funding will enable production, artist support and widened public access.

Music Cities Network (MCN) Summit and 'Summit Week' Programme – 2026 - Sunderland has been selected to host the MCN Summer Summit in 2026, welcoming representatives from 17 global music cities. North East CA investment will support delivery of the international summit and a public CreaTech conference delivered with Sunderland Software City as part of TechNExt; It will also include delivery of an early-career musician conference delivered with The Bunker and We Make Culture at the new Culture House with international showcase gigs

Make Music Day – Year of Music Closing Event (21 June 2026) - A Unity-in-the-Community-style event at Sunderland Minster, showcasing a wide range of music genres and communities, and acting as a high-profile culmination of the Year of Music programme.

2.2 Outputs and Outcomes

Outputs	2026-27	Total
Number of enterprises receiving financial support other than grants	30	30
Number of knowledge exchange interactions	30	30
Number of cultural / tourism events taking place (that are attributable to CA investment funding)	2	2
Description of Outcomes		Total
Number of attendees participating in a cultural tourism event	4000	4,000

2.3 Timetable for Implementation

Milestone	Actual/Forecast Date
Sunderland Year of Music programme commences	June 2025
Unity in the Community event	17—18 October 2025

Music Against Child Poverty	7 th December 2025
Ongoing events programme delivery of Sunderland Year of Music	October 2025 – June 2026
Final event – International Music Summit & Festival	21 st June 2026 (one year anniversary)
Evaluation	Q2 2026/27 - to complete by June 2026
Financial Completion Date	30 th June 2026
Anticipated Proposal Completion Date (date by which all outputs/outcomes will have been achieved)	30 th September 2026

3.0 Evaluation

An evaluation will be undertaken as part of the project and will assess the impact, benefit and reach of the overall programme of activity delivered through the Sunderland Year of Music.

4.0 Appraisal

The appraisal of the business case provided by the applicant has been assessed and was rated GREEN on all aspects, with the appraiser outlining that the impact of funding will bring was very clear in terms of strategic alignment and outcomes.

It was noted to be a transformational cultural programme that will drive inclusive economic growth, enhances civic pride, and repositions Sunderland as a dynamic, creative city in the North East through innovation and economic growth, it will bring skills and employment, re-image public streets by bringing music to the high streets and other public venues, promote health and vibrancy and bring recognition to the region through additional visitors, talent and international partnerships. It was demonstrated that the project is not only environmentally responsible but also strategically aligned with North East CA's vision. It demonstrated how cultural programming can be a vehicle for climate action, economic resilience, and community engagement - all key pillars of "A Greener North East."

Overall, it was felt that the programme demonstrated a low-risk, high-impact investment opportunity that delivers against regional priorities and unlocks meaningful change across Sunderland and the wider North East. The project was considered complimentary rather than competitive to other ongoing cultural events and had been developed in conjunction with Sunderland City Council, Sunderland Music City and other cultural partners.

The appraisal concluded that North East CA's support will enable delivery of flagship events tied to the Mayor's agenda and of international significance, including Music Against Child Poverty, the Community Cohesion anniversary and the Music Cities Network Summit. Managed by experienced partners and underpinned by a robust evaluation framework, the programme represented a low-risk, high-impact investment. It will deliver measurable cultural, social, and economic benefits while strengthening Sunderland's role as an internationally recognised Music City.

B. Potential Impact on North East Combined Authority Objectives

North East CA is currently supporting a series of initiatives such as the Culture and Creative Investment Programme (CCIP) offering loans and equity, Creative Growth Programmes, skills bootcamps, and designated creative zones. These are designed to bolster creative businesses across the region, including Sunderland. A high-profile example is the £25 million commitment for the Crown Works Studio in Sunderland for screen industries development, expected to create thousands of jobs and deliver long-term regional economic benefit, and the recent approval of the Riverside Sunderland Creative Development Zone (NECA Cabinet, December 2025)

The programme overall is forecast to deliver 500 events, 100,000 attendees, 30 schools and 30 enterprises supported, 100 jobs created/safeguarded, £2m GVA uplift, and wellbeing benefits for 74,800 people.

C. Key risks

A summary of key risks relating to the investment proposal is included below:

Risk Description	Impact and Likelihood	
	Consequence	Probability
Insufficient funding secured	Programme scaled back or reduced in scope; reputational risk to partners	Medium
Safeguarding incident at an event.	A child or vulnerable adult is hurt. Reputational risk.	Low
Security issue at an event.	Abuse/harm to an audience member; staff member; performer.	Low
Health and safety issue at an event	Harm to a person or property	Low
Loss of staff member.	Capacity of the team to comprehensively deliver Year of Music is reduced.	Low
Disagreement with artist or subcontractor over project delivery/payment.	Reputational damage leading to subcontractors not wanting to work with Sunderland Music City.	Low
Low public engagement or attendance	Reduced impact, poor return on investment, reputational risk	Low-Medium
Delivery partner capacity or failure	Delays, reduced quality, or failure to deliver outcomes	Medium
Reputational risks (e.g. poor artist experience, safety incidents)	Negative media coverage; loss of public and political confidence	Low
External disruption (e.g. extreme weather, transport strikes, global events)	Event cancellations, reduced visitor numbers	Medium
Lack of long-term legacy or sustainability	Missed opportunity to embed cultural growth and skills impact	Medium

D. Financial and other resources implications

The financial profile for the project/programme is included below

Funding source	2025/26	2026/27	Total
Other Public Sector leverage – Arts Council England (£)		£95,000	£95,000
North East CA Investment Fund (£)	£50,000	£50,000	£100,000
Private Sector Leverage (£)	£125,000	£125,000	£250,000
Total (£)	£175,000	£270,000	£445,000

E. Legal implications

The Monitoring officer has been consulted and has no comments to add.

F. Equalities implications

The North East CA follows the Public Sector Equality duty and the work referenced in this report has due regard to the need to achieve the objectives set out under s149 of the Equality Act 2010. The activity outlined in this report will contribute to the North East CA equality objectives, including deepening our understanding of the inequalities faced by residents in our region and the impact of those on people's lives.

G. Consultation and engagement

The Year of Music has full support from Sunderland City Council/Sunderland Culture – a letter of support from Nick Malyan, CEO of Sunderland Culture outlines the alignment and need for the Year of Music programme. The letter highlights strategic alignment and inclusivity, as well as a recognition that rather than creating displacement the year-long programme will support the aims of the local authority.

H. Appendices
None attached.

I. Background papers
None.

J. Contact officers

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K. Glossary

Sunderland Music City CIC	Community Interest Company delivering Sunderland’s Year of Music programme.
Sunderland Year of Music (YoM)	A year-long cultural programme launched June 2025 to showcase the city’s musical heritage and contemporary scene, with events running to June 2026.
Senior Leadership Team (SLT)	Internal leadership group that supported the £100k funding on 15 October 2025, with branding conditions.
New Communities Music Festival	An inclusive festival held 17–18 October 2025 celebrating Sunderland’s diverse communities through music
Music Against Child Poverty	A charity concert; 2025 edition scheduled for 7 December 2025 at The Fire Station with a £50,000 budget, benefitting child poverty charities such as Love, Amelia.
Love, Amelia	Regional children’s charity providing essential items and support to families across Tyne & Wear and County Durham; beneficiary of Music Against Child Poverty.
The Fire Station	Sunderland venue hosting multiple Year of Music events including Music Against Child Poverty.
Keel Square	Public space in Sunderland used for Year of Music activities during the New Communities event.
Local Growth Plan	North East CA’s strategic plan.
Music Cities Network	International network positioning Sunderland within global music-led urban development and exchange.
GVA (Gross Value Added)	Economic metric indicating contribution to the economy; the programme forecasts a £2m GVA uplift.
Crown Works Studio	Proposed Sunderland film-screen development with £25m support, cited as a high-profile regional creative investment.
Place-making	Strategic approach to shaping the character and economy of places through culture and creative activity.
Programme Assurance Team	Internal function liaising on finance, procurement and legal compliance prior to awarding contracts or grants.

L. Consultee

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