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Music Venue Trust Regional Meetings Notes - April 2016

To summarise key points raised/discussed in Manchester, Leicester and Bristol and we have compiled notes from listening to the recordings of each meeting. These notes are now being shared for feedback and to inform the content of Venues Day 2016.

(Note: GMV = Grassroots Music Venue, LA = Local Authority, MVT = Music Venue Trust, MVA = Music Venues Alliance, TAMVA = Trade Association of the MVA)

Panel 1: The National Picture

1. Arts Council England (ACE):

- invited venues to come and talk to them as new opportunities are opening up for a conversation about where support should be going.
- ACE cannot backfill or fund failing businesses but is very keen on development, networking, sharing info etc.
- If funding bids are initially rejected, read feedback, discuss, resubmit.
- MVT discussing workshops with ACE & venues at Venues Day to simplify what both sides need (many venues see the application process as inaccessible).
- The presence of ACE at the meetings and fact they funded the 3 English ones shows they are open to change.
- MVT will continue to work on collective funding bids with ACE too.

2. Changing Perceptions

- Need to change the language around music venues to emphasise positive stories and build a positive impression, more in line with recognised arts venues. At present most campaigning is reactive rather than proactive (see Panel 2).
- UK Music is creating resources for venues to use to demonstrate the value of what they do (12 studies). These tools will enable conversations with LAs and potential funders to quantify/clarify why venues deserve support.
- Discussions highlighted inconsistency of support for culture from LAs. UK Music encouraged demonstrating the importance of each venue to the town/city's economy.
- As well as quantifying the economic contribution venues make to their community, the social value needs to be enunciated, ie. what the community would lose if it closes. It is difficult for the people who run venues to perceive themselves in this way but The Tin in Coventry successfully 'rebranded' itself, completely changing its relationship with the local auth. and leading to funding.
- Local plans often include everything that a GMV does without mentioning music venues. We need to find ways to show that GMVs are integral to their local community.
- Communication can be a problem, eg. where a venue was told it couldn't seek external funding because it couldn't demonstrate LA support for its work. Suggested that supportive MPs can be asked to use their influence with LAs.
- For many years 'commercial music' didn't need support so no-one asked for it (unlike other artforms). This isn't true anymore so venues need to learn how to engage with ACE, UK Music, councillors, MPs – lots of these people go to gigs. The support is often there but not verbalised/written in to policy. This is the challenge.

- Brighton is a good example of a process where a petition to challenge licensing policy led to a wider discussion about the sector's needs. Surprise from councillors that GMVs don't make money has led to further discussion, better understanding of the need to balance noise complaints against the city's cultural well-being and now establishing a focus group for music in Brighton.

- The Music Cities Movement shares good practice from across the world (MVT is a partner).

3. Collective Working:

- MVT needs venues to respond to calls for gathering info, opinions etc. so that we can push forward collective working, change the language being used and influence what official bodies expect/demand from venues.
- Collectivism while maintaining independence gives us enormous reach. If every venue has 5-10K people on its mailing list, then we have a huge audience.
- Working collectively locally is also beneficial, eg. venues advertising each other's gigs in York where there is no listings mag or postering sites, multi-venue festivals in Leicester and Derby.

4. Music Industry

- The challenge for new/small but ambitious venues in establishing relationships within the music industry was discussed. National agents 'think that a venue with 150 cap. Is too small to deal with' but in a smaller town this venue is the perfect size for the audience it can attract. If a venue is losing out to one in a neighbouring town then work needs to go into building its reputation/profile to compete.
- At the same time the brevity of tours came up at every meeting; 1 gig in a geographic area rather than in each town that has an audience (Manchester/Liverpool, Huddersfield/Burnley, Nottingham or Birmingham for The Midlands, Bristol/Bath, Tunbridge Wells/Guildford/Brighton). This needs to be raised with agents at Venues Day.

5. Planning/Development

- Threats from developments near to venues was discussed. Should problems arise then strength from quoting examples from around the country was emphasised: know what the issues are, keep updated with changes to legislation, keep an eye on whether Environmental Health are objecting to plans. Eg. case in Scotland where a noise complaint came from a new resident led to the developer being told by the judge to pay for sound proofing in the venue because warnings had been made prior to the build.

6. PRS for Music

- The difficult relationship between GMVs and PRS was discussed at every meeting, particularly the fact that the minimum fee represents a much greater charge than the 3% it is supposed to represent, the inconsistency with which GMVs are treated (sometimes even within the same town/city), the fact that charges are estimated even though venues are expected to complete returns for every show, and that charges are applied even for non-PRS registered artists.
- All of these form part of MVT's ongoing discussions with PRS for music. If advances are made, we will report to all MVA members.
- MVT can get directly involved in an individual venue's negotiations with PRS if they are a TAMVA member. We do not have the resources to do this for all venues so can only offer it to trade association members.

Panel 2: Localism and Community

1. Self-definition vs. public perception

- Often a discrepancy between what a GMV think it is and what others perceive it as (eg. multi-arts space vs. bar/nightclub). Although Chris Sharp (the owner) felt that the 44,000 signatures on a petition to save The Fleece (Bristol) demonstrated that it had made a real connection with the local community.
- LAs need to recognise cultural, social and economic value of venues. Can be difficult to approach councils: inertia/lack of resources/overwork.
- Conversely, when an eloquent complainer comes forward the LA will listen. Therefore, venues need to establish a positive impression with LAs prior to complaint. Lots of local councillors are music fans/musicians/DJs so try to find one and approach them.
- Established venues such as Leadmill (Sheffield) have a well-recognised community role. The 35th anniversary celebrations brought forward lots of couples who had met there: 'As a venue you are investing in artists, in the community, in people's memories and families.' Night & Day (Manchester) had a similar outpouring of emotion when threatened. Suggestion that venues try to tap into their 'non-financial capital' – emotional connections/importance.
- Leadmill are also known for training apprentices, have good links with universities and use local tradesmen.
- Quantifying volunteers can be helpful in demonstrating social value.
- Articulate what you do as a venue: rehearsal space, venue for local group meetings, book club, yoga, playgroup, youth group, café, volunteer/training opps. etc.
- Definition of community can be multi-faceted: a community of musicians a venue supports; a community of volunteers & apprentices you offer training/mentoring to; a geographical community.
- MVT does not want GMVs to change what they are doing but enable them to gain recognition for what they already do – what do you need to help achieve this?

2. Culture vs. business

- MVT's work is a balance between repositioning GMVs as cultural venues and running more efficiently as businesses. The structure of how a venue is set up as a business can have an effect on both how it is perceived and the support it might be entitled to.
- VAT Exemption: 701/47 could apply to ticket sales in GMVs if the organisation contracting, staging and promoting the event can clearly demonstrate through its organisational structure that it is a not-for-profit venture. Most venues do not make a profit (does not include the money to pay staff/owners) as all money made is reinvested. By changing the part of the business which puts on the gigs into a Community Interest Company (CIC), charity or social enterprise (not the whole business, ie. not the bar or other more commercial activities) then it is clearly demonstrable that you are not a profit-making company.
- NB. Moving to a CIC model does have implications for the money going to the artist if the contract is a % of door take (ie. the artist fee increases by 17%, the venue only gets 3% of what would have been the VAT) – need for contract renegotiation.
- TAMVA members can receive assistance with structure & VAT through The One, Two Project.
- Business Rates: The Treasury created a zero rating for businesses with a rateable value of less than £15K in the last budget. If a venue has this rateable value, then they need to approach their LA to apply for zero rating. Charities, Social Enterprises and CICs can apply for reduced business rates on the grounds of their cultural contribution. MVT is checking the wording GMVs need to request this reduction.

- Different places have different emphases in terms of where arts/culture sits. In Leicester the City Council have it in Economic Development because they know that a thriving night-time economy and tourism will attract skilled workers to their city. They believe a busy city centre is safer, whereas Derby City Council don't want more city centre footfall.

3. Proactive Support

- Enthusiasm was expressed for the idea of some sort of campaign to demonstrate positive support for venues before problems arise.
- Possible 'Friends of' group for one venue or a collective of venues?
- View expressed that venue loyalty might be an outdated concept with audiences following artists? It was generally felt that this varies – in a city with more choice there may be less loyalty than in a town with only 1 venue.
- It was suggested that every venue has a core of supporters who value the venue but don't necessarily attend lots of events there.
- Some support for idea of a standard letter of support that punters could send to their LA. However, unless there is a problem with that venue it is very possible the LA wouldn't know what to do with the letters; who would they be given to? They could just get ignored. This needs further thought.
- Perhaps it's not the quantity but the quality of the representation? Testimonials from people who started/passed through the venue and have gone on to achieve, eg. a technician in a West End theatre. Demands time to gather/solicit.

4. Asset of Community Value (ACV) Status

- MVT has an ACV toolkit but is not convinced about rolling it out as experiences have been so variable in terms of local authority responses to GMVs applying and it does not afford any legal status (eg. The Half Moon in Herne Hill was given planning permission to become a restaurant even with ACV status as a live music venue.
- We heard from the Sir Charles Napier CIC, Blackburn experience. The leaseholder brought in solicitors to fight it but ACV status was granted in recognition of its contribution to the night-time economy.
- Other experiences of pub co.s being against ACV applications were brought up, one put up supply prices.

Panel 3: Music Industry Issues

1. Agents, promoters & venues

- Gigging and merch. are now prime source of income for musicians so the relationships between agents, promoters and venues are very important. More networking opportunities are needed for these professions to interact.
- Fact that tour support from labels has been cut is a huge problem; tours are very short compared to in the past. Goes back to problem of one city being selected in a geographical area rather than a venue in each city (one agent admitted that on a short tour his instinct would be to look for a Birmingham/Wolverhampton and Nottingham date rather than Leicester but he doesn't know why).
- Some developing artists get passed to national promoters very quickly, so cutting out venues and local promoters.
- Do agents move bands into bigger venues too quickly? A GMV can lose money 2-3 times on a developing artist but on the 4th show the band goes to a bigger venue (even though they won't sell it out). Suggested that often the band's manager wants them to be perceived as a bigger band.
- For new venues the booking process is 'smoke and mirrors'. It is not easy to establish relationships or know what sort of offers agents are expecting, particularly when the actual costs of opening a venue, eg. electricity, are not accepted by most agents as part of a costings sheet.
- There was a call for MVT to write a 'What to expect from a GMV' guide to manage expectations when working at this level for agents & promoters.

2. Costs (including riders & national ads)

- Question raised as to whether hire rates reflect the cost to the venue in Academy Music Group (AMG). Even here the answer is no, figures are manipulated to reach the amount 'the agent is expecting for the artist'. This means that at AMG level bands are often being partly paid out of the bar take rather than ticket sales.
- Agents add other costs on top of the artist fee (rider, national ad etc.) but they appear to believe that if the artist fee is covered by ticket sales then the deal is fine; they seem unaware of the costs of opening & running the venue or think that the bar take will cover that. Most punters only buy a couple of drinks at gigs in GMVs. This means that GMVs are usually funding their live nights out of club nights, renting out space for rehearsal etc.
- Overall the feeling is that agents are applying the same model to GMVs as for large venues ('Do you have a lighting director?') while at the same time asking the GMV to market the gig at their own cost.
- GMVs do not have time to do everything demanded of them externally (including being told to 'get approval' from agents, holding dates etc.) when they also have social media campaigns to run and toilets to unblock...
- Can venues reduce costs: catering, riders, tour supports etc? A newly opened venue had a baptism of fire & were definitely taken advantage of with riders (Lego, champagne, cigarettes etc.) Other venues talked about the ridiculous demands on riders (eg. a smoothie maker). Riders should be negotiable; a conversation rather than a set of demands. The rider comes after the deal/contract so questioning it shouldn't lead to the loss of a show. However, time spent negotiating can be a problem as this also represents a cost to the GMV.
- Suggestion that riders should be appropriate to the size of venue, or a set budget (£50-£150 is reasonable). Some venues do this: fee is x, catering budget is y.
- Tour supports will often submit a rider too. They are entitled to beer and water, not a full buy-out.

- £100 charge for national advertising is standard. Most venues feel they would get more value from online ads. An agent said venues have a right to ask where it's going in the same way tour managers ask where your local ad money goes.
- The point was made that tours booked direct with venues rather than through a national promoter sometime require a national ad to pull them together and make them look like a national tour.

3. Ticket prices

- Although still cheap, ticket prices in GMVs are (generally) increasing; a £4/5 going up to £8 (and even then ancillary revenue often props up the artists' fees). Concern was expressed that people don't have the disposable income to come to a couple of gigs a week.
- View put that the stumbling block is not always the price of the ticket but the quality of the bill. For festivals this means more than just music. For venues it can mean a great bill of 2-3 bands for £20 in an AMG venue. (Conversely though agents sometimes don't want a support band or bring friends of the headline band with them as support, so preventing a local promoter from putting together a great bill.)

4. GMVs and national promoters

- Discussion of co-promotion between GMVs and national promoters, ie. sharing the costs of career development for artists but also sharing benefits when they move up to a larger venue. Most venues want to do this but although it works for some others say they get gazumped. A national promoter said that this decision often comes from a manager or agent who want only 1 person to deal with rather than a group.
- A further reason given was that national promoters have 'more access to potential audiences'. MVT would dispute this as a quality vs. quantity issue.
- A national promoter stated that there's 'no real money in it for a promoter putting on artists under 800 cap; it's just about building artists.'
- Suggestion that big and small promoters would benefit from a regular dialogue to keep an overview of what is happening at different levels.
- Promoters with a strong presence in a region are sometimes asked 'whether they mind' if a band plays a venue in a particular town/city by agents, eg. DHP with Leicester, SJM with Liverpool.

5. Artists which are right for GMVs

- An important point was made about the fact that some artists are neither on their way up nor down but are the right scale for smaller venues, but often the people programming/promoting in GMVs don't have the knowledge/experience to recognise that one of these acts might be right for their venue.

6. Developing the local scene

- With a reduction in touring it was suggested that perhaps more attention should be put into developing a local scene? Eg. in Leicester you can show a good path for local talent to move up through the venues and through the size of touring band they support.
- Comment also made that there are lots of local bands who play because they enjoy it but they have little interest in career development.

7. Training & poaching

- One venue shared the experience of training up sound engineers only to have them repeatedly poached by a bigger (chain) venue in the same city which can afford to offer more money (£50 a night more). Ironically a meeting about collaborating in artist development had taken place between these venues 'but the technical manager did not seem to share the sense of collaboration.'
- Discussion suggested that as self-employed staff are subject to market forces there's little that can be done to combat this, but again the fact that GMVs are not 'allowed'

to put their real venue costs into contracts with agents means that GMVs cannot pay a competitive rate for their tech staff.

- UK Music said that as they are working with colleges they could point venues towards places training techs looking for work experience. The problem is not sourcing the trainees though but holding on to them.
- Another area of training discussed was with new promoters: helping up and coming promoters to have positive experiences so they will try to develop their own skills and specialisms vs. an expectation that you will pass on all your hard-won expertise for free.
- MVT are looking into technical apprenticeships with White Light. Market economics requires pipeline economics, ie. if good trainees are brought forward and it works for the GMVs then they will be interested in it, but only if it saves them money.

8. Club Nights

- Club nights can make 3-4 times the bar take of live gigs. However, the fact that pubs now have late licences has greatly reduced club night takings.
- After gigs the majority of the audience leave.

9. Festivals

- Festival season being longer has cut down availability for venues. Used to be that only headline acts had exclusivity clauses but can now be the whole bill. Sept/Oct tours can't be sold until after the summer – big problem for nearby towns/cities.
- There's also a link back to short tours not developing a big audience base for artists to be ready to sell lots of festival tickets.

10. Peer to peer learning

- Talk to/learn from other venues that are getting the bands you might want. Have they got a better tech spec, better marketing, could they introduce you to key people? Collaboration not competition.

11. Ticketing

- Venues tend to be looking for 1-2 ticketing partners because the old model of dotting ticket allocations around is too work intensive.
- Ticketweb offered to help GMVs with meeting reach as well as developing their platform to make putting tickets on sale quicker.

12. Other challenges

- Decrease in tour support from labels + increase in costs means that there's a requirement for bands to invest in their own development. Many either don't have the money or aren't prepared to invest.
- Young audiences are going to see DJs rather than bands. As students they are introduced to affordable DJ shows and that gets them interested in this genre.

Wrap Up

Ideas for Venues Day 2016 include:

- Help with social media / marketing
- ACE Workshops
- Presentation on structures for managing your business (CICs, VAT, business rates etc)
- Music Industry relationships – including standardising the offer docs for GMVs / What to Expect from a GMV guidance
- Set of tools for how to open a new venue