**Supporting Grassroots Live Music Evaluation**

**Arts Council Response**

Arts Council England recognises the pivotal role that [Grassroots Music Venues](https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/supporting-grassroots-live-music) (GMVs) play within England’s thriving music scene. Valued cultural spaces within their communities, they provide opportunities for people from all backgrounds to experience live music as audience members and participants. Often described as the UK music industry’s research and development department, as well as providing a crucible for the development of onstage artist talent they are also a critical part of the pipeline for the development of the wider ecology of venue management teams, sound and lighting technicians, promoters, managers, agents and audiences who enable musicians to develop and thrive.

GMVs exist at all scales – from Atherton’s 80-capacity The Snug to Sheffield’s 900-capacity The Leadmill, and everything in between – but their value is not limited to providing platforms for live gigs: many are used as rehearsal and recording venues or play an increasing part as vital community spaces. Despite – and in some ways because of – the profound and disruptive impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on England’s grassroots music ecology, many GMVs, particularly those that are independent, have necessarily changed the way they work. By branching out to new areas of endeavour and developing new types of relationship and partnership with their audiences, communities and industry, GMVs have begun to secure an even better recognised place within England’s cultural landscape.

As part of our commitment to supporting the GMV sector, in May 2019 Arts Council England announced the launch of a new ring-fenced annual fund of £1.5 million within our National Lottery Project Grants programme.  The Supporting Grassroots Live Music (SGLM) fund invests in projects to host and promote live music in grassroots venues. SGLM recognises the unique challenges GMVs, and the promoters that work within them, face and their (until recently) relatively limited experience of – and success in – accessing public funds.  From the Arts Council’s perspective SGLM was a great opportunity to build our relationship with the sector and to support venues and promoters to develop their businesses and grow their skills and confidence in applying for public funding.

None of us were to know that, less than a year after the launch of SGLM, all of England’s live music venues would be closed due to a global pandemic, bringing a whole new set of challenges for the sector. In March 2020, Arts Council set aside all its usual National Lottery funded programmes, including the SGLM fund, and focused instead on a series of emergency funding opportunities including delivering the UK Government’s Cultural Recovery Fund (CRF). The first of these CRF programmes was targeted at the GMV sector. Known as the Emergency Grassroots Music Venue Fund, in August 2020 135 at risk GMVs received a share of £3.36 million to prevent imminent permanent closure. Over the coming months – according to the Music Venue Trust – over £41.4 million in CRF funding was received by venues and others operating in the grassroots music sector, reaching over 89% of England’s music venues.

Like many small, grassroots elements of the cultural sector, GMVs are resilient, innovating their way through the challenges they have faced, and swiftly adapting the way they work over the past three years. The SGLM fund reopened in July 2020, and by the end of March 2023 we will have invested [£7.23 million in 378 projects](https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-03/NLPG%20Grassroots%20Music%20%28Awards%20Only%29.xlsx) proposed by grassroots music venues and the promotors who work in and with them. Across the country, we’ve seen a host of significant initiatives and the clear benefits rising from them. The research indicates that:

* public investment in venues and promoters has huge benefits for artists, with 80% of grantees using funds to support more artists, 63% supporting a more diverse range of artists and 59% working with higher profile artists;

* local communities have benefited from 63% of grantees programming a wider range of genres with 59% of applicants developing a more diverse audience and 43% a younger audience;

* venues have become more connected to and embedded in place, with the fund supporting 64% of grantees to engage more with local individuals and groups and 63% to develop new relationships and networks;

* 38% of grantees have developed new income streams, with 45% describing themselves as more financially resilient and 41% reporting a change to their long-term models;

* and capital investment has enabled 46% to improve their sound/lighting equipment, 29% their environmental performance, and 13% their venue accessibility.

We are grateful to the team at **the hub** who undertook [the detailed evaluation of the SGLM fund](https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/supporting-grassroots-live-music), and to all the venues, promoters and other stakeholders who contributed to their review. We are encouraged that their evaluation demonstrates such a strong fit between the aspirations of those who work in grassroots live music venues (GMVs) and our strategy [Let’s Create](https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/lets-create), and delighted to see the impact of the SGLM fund in realising these aspirations.

It's important to say that the creation of the SGLM fund was (and is) not the first, or only route, for GMVs and those who work within them to access Arts Council funding. For some years we have invested in a range of initiatives to support and promote access, inclusivity and diversity of programming within the sector. For example, both the Music Venue Trust and Independent Venue Week have received several National Lottery Project Grants outside of the SGLM fund. And our National Portfolio – a group of nearly a thousand arts and cultural organisations who receive regular funding – has long included several organisations of direct relevance to the GMV sector.

Our new National Portfolio (2023-2026) launches on 1 April 2023, and we are delighted that it will include:

* *Live music venues*: **Band on the Wall** in Manchester, the **Cambridge Junction**, **Future Yard CIC** in Birkenhead and **2Funky Arts** in Leicester will help develop local learning, community and artist development programmes;
* *Promoters*: organisations such as the **Asian Arts Agency**, **Punch Records,** **African Night Fever**, **Create Define Release** and **zerOclassikal** work with diverse communities to help develop platforms and audiences by programming and facilitating tours;
* *Talent development organisations*: such as **Baby People** in Derby, the **Midi Music Company** in London, **The Warren** in Hull, **AudioActive** in Worthing, **Reform Radio** in Manchester and the **SoCo Music Project** in Southampton all develop young people’s skills, knowledge and confidence to take their first steps into live performance within the grassroots music sector;
* *Sector development organisations*: including **Attitude is Everything**, who support the music and live event industries in valuing disabled people as audience members, performers, professionals and volunteers; **Brighter Sound** who run a series of creative projects, residencies, commissions, training and events that support people to carve their own unique path in music, and particularly champions women and people of marginalised genders and the **Music Managers Forum**’s Accelerator programme, the world’s only independent funding and professional development programme designed exclusively for artist, songwriter, DJ and producer managers.

One of the main aims of establishing the SGLM fund was to help familiarise venues and promoters with our application process and to make more visible the Arts Council’s commitment to the GMV sector. We believe we have been successful in that aim and **the hub** evaluation indicates that 65% of respondents feel they now have the skills and understanding to make a strong application.

But for all the successes and positive impact of the SGLM fund on venues, promoters, artists and audiences, we recognise that the landscape for GMVs and all those who rely on them for work remains incredibly challenging. We know that audience numbers are unpredictable and have not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels, for example, and that programming schedules have not fully settled back down into their usual rhythm and costs are increasing. Although our investment cannot resolve all these challenges, we are committed to ensuring that GMVs and promoters remain confident that Arts Council funding is open to an application from them.

However, we believe the time is right to move to the next phase of our relationship with the GMV sector. We will keep the SGLM ring fenced fund in place until September 2023. That means that a further £1.5 million will be available for application from venues and promoters over the coming months. At that point, support for grassroots live music will become one of the Arts Council’s new priorities for National Lottery Project Grants, initially for two years (until September 2025). Decision panels will prioritise strong applications from grassroots music venues and promoters and we expect that the result of this will be that we will at the very least maintain our current level of support at £1.5 million each year.

However, we recognise that there is some apprehension in the sector about the removal of the ring fence for the SGLM programme. We are therefore also committing to the following:-

* continuing to monitor application numbers and success rates from the grassroots live music sector;

* identifying where, geographically and in relation to under-represented groups, we should prioritise further advice giving and support;
* developing new partnerships to ensure that applicants that have had more limited access to support and advice are identified and supported to make applications including for example, independent promoters and those from Black, Asian and ethnically diverse backgrounds;
* refreshing and improving our National Lottery Project Grants Music information sheet to include case studies of projects that have been successfully supported through Supporting Grassroots Live Music and provide examples of how these align with our strategy Let’s Create.

In addition to implementing these changes to our National Lottery Project Grants programme, we will also do the following to support the GMV sector:-

* invest in Music Venue Properties (MVP), a new charitable company whose sole purpose is to support GMV’s as a benign landlord focused on reinvesting back into the grassroots music sector. We will contribute £500,000 to MVP’s start up (proof of concept) phase, supporting the organisation to purchase the freeholds of at least four grassroots music venues in England to secure these vital community assets for the long term;

* continue to work with partners across the music industry – such as the Music Venue Trust, the Association of Independent Promoters, LIVE, and UK Music – to ensure we understand the ongoing challenges that venues and promoters are facing, and through their networks provide advice and support;

* champion grassroots live music by placing a spotlight on successful publicly funded GMV projects through our blogs, newsletters and social media; actively publicising our funding opportunities and advice giving; encouraging those working in the grassroots live music sector to sign up and follow our accounts to ensure they receive the latest news; and sharing the outcomes of this work with the sector and other stakeholders.

The Arts Council recognises that our work in supporting grassroots music venues and those that work within and with them is not done. It remains the case that too many people currently encounter barriers, real or perceived, to entering, remaining and being successful in the UK music industry. Where you live, and what opportunities are available locally, have an important influence on how welcome you feel within the industry and whether you perceive it as a viable career pathway. Equally, no matter where you live or who you are, we believe you should have an equal right and opportunity to attend a live music event, to see gig-going as an activity where you will encounter, or have the opportunity to work with, artists and music relevant to your life and interests, and where you will be welcome and where any barriers to your attendance will have been removed. We believe that in delivering Let’s Create we should also be playing our part in helping ensure that by 2030 a vibrant network of grassroots live music venues are thriving across the country. We remain committed to working with the GMV sector to achieve that.