The second Venues Day event was held at the Ministry of Sound on Tuesday 20th October 2015. The event coincided with the launch of the report, London's Grassroots Music Venues Rescue Plan, produced by the Mayor of London's Music Venues Taskforce, in response to the high number of venue closures in the city. At last year’s inaugural event, the idea for an association of music venues was mooted, and the Music Venue Trust must be congratulated for setting up not only the Music Venues Alliance, but also a trade association, the Trade Association of the Music Venues Alliance (TAMVA), which launched at Venues Day.

Live Music Exchange’s Emma Webster was at Venues Day and has put together ten things learned at the event for this week’s blog post.

1. **Make some noise!** The word ‘crisis’ was used throughout the day to describe the current state of grassroots music venues, not just in London, but across the UK. However, as Shadow Culture Secretary, Michael Dugher MP, suggested, the music industry and politicians need to start by admitting that there is a problem. London now has a rescue plan, backed by the Mayor, but, as Music Venue Trust’s Mark Davyd later suggested, we still need to make a lot of noise so that politicians and local authorities are aware of the issue; Dugher recommended emailing MPs to raise awareness.

2. **Where are the big promoters?** The first panel of the day featured Geoff Taylor from the recording industry trade body, the British Phonographic Industry (BPI), who stated that the (recorded) music industry is conscious of working within a wider ecology and that record labels recognise the value of small music venues to their own business, in that they recognise that the ‘live music scene is an intrinsic part of going on to be a successful recording artist’. As with the 2014 event, however, the elephant in the room was the lack of input from the ‘top’ end of the live music industry, i.e. the larger promoters and ticket agencies. While Venues Day attendees berated the recording industry for not investing heavily enough in the grassroots end of the industry via tour support, for me it was again surprising that no-one mentioned the lack of support from major promoters and ticket agents. Indeed, BBC Radio 6’s Steve Lamacq warned of the potential danger of live music going the same way as football with the large venues attracting all the money and the smaller local venues – like local football clubs – in a state of decline. Lamacq suggested that if 15 year-olds can’t get to a gig on a bus, they may never get to see a gig and may never engage with live music; he suggested that the money needs to trickle down from the large-scale to the grassroots levels in order that there are decent venues with decent equipment in order to produce long-term music fans. I suggest that perhaps next year’s event could feature a spokesperson from the upper echelons of the live music industry – Live Nation, for example – in order to help make this happen.

3. **Introduce the Agent of Change principle.** Mark Davyd of the Music Venue Trust suggested that,
while the Department of Culture, Media and Sport is theoretically supportive of small music venues, national planning guidelines are not working for small venues at present and that more deregulation is required. As CEO of Ministry of Sound, Lohan Presencer, had earlier pointed out, ‘housing trumps music’ in that new housing will usually be favoured over an existing music venue. To counter this and to offer some protection to music venues, the Rescue Plan mentioned above contains a recommendation for the adoption of the Agent of Change principle, as does LMX’s own Edinburgh Live Music Census Report. The Agent of Change principle forces the party responsible for the change – a developer wishing to build new flats next to an existing venue, for example – to pay for any necessary measures and interventions, e.g. sound proofing. Minister for Culture, Ed Vaizey MP, and Dugher both suggested taking a delegation to see the planning minister in order to add the Agent of Change principle to the planning bill which is going through Parliament at present.

4. **Under attack: the Live Music Act 2012.** As Mark Davyd suggested, one effect of the Live Music Act 2012 has been that his venue now has a lot of amateur competitors (as predicted by Andy Inglis in 2012), and that local authorities are now regulating music venues even more heavily than before, citing the example of London’s Village Underground, which apparently has 72 conditions on its licence. Davyd suggested that there is a need for a follow-up to the Live Music Act 2012, a suggestion which was quickly taken on board by the Peer responsible for the original Act, Lord Clement-Jones, who suggested developing the ‘Live Music Act Part 2’, once the issues on the ground are better understood.

5. **Venues to access arts council funding?** Vaizey suggested that a music venue ‘has as much right to call itself a cultural venue’ as a regional theatre and that venues should apply for arts council funding. However, as pointed out by Mark Davyd and others, the timeframe of the live music sector is much shorter than that worked to by many arts council-funded organisations, and arts councils tend to fund programmes rather than one-off events and/or infrastructure. It was suggested that rather than arts councils putting funding into tours which enable one artist to buy decent equipment and transport – ‘they get £20K of equipment plugged into shit speakers … and think that live music smells funny’, that the funding be put into venues instead (or as well as), which would then benefit a much greater number of artists; 20 venues could support 1,800 new bands. Suggestions are that arts councils reassess their funding application process to suit small to medium live music venues and/or to consider funding infrastructure costs, and that PRS for Music Foundation’s Momentum funding also be accessible to venues.

6. **Live music venues may not just be for live music.** Venues were also recommended to consider changing their business models to become community interest companies or social enterprises, as this opens up other funding streams and also offers other protections. It was also suggested that venues use their space for other activities, such as rehearsal space, parent/baby activities, yoga or even wedding. The benefits of the new national group could be seen a week later wherein one venue manager used the Music Venue Alliance Facebook page to ask other venues for further ideas as to how to make use of their venue space outside of usual live music hours.

7. **Tax breaks for venues have still not materialised.** Venues Day 2014 saw a Conservative MP offering tax breaks for small live music venues (before the last General Election, it should be added). Ed Vaizey this year said that he was happy to look at a VAT discount as calls were made by some for venues to receive the same benefits as orchestras and theatres. In general, more research into the economic impact of venues was suggested by a number of attendees throughout the day, including Dugher, in order to make the case for the value of the sector to the Treasury, especially at a time where government departments are facing a comprehensive spending review.

8. **Survey of European venues shows that size does matter.** The Live DMA European Network is the umbrella group for venue associations across Western Europe. The organisation has carried out a very interesting survey of its members to find out more about who they represent, common issues, and operational models. One of the most interesting findings was that the bigger the venue, the higher the percentage of programme costs covered by ticket sales. So for small venues (<400 capacity, which make up around 50% of Live-DMA’s members), only 41% of programme costs come from ticket sales, whereas for big venues (>1000), 96% of programme costs are covered by ticket sales, indicating that bar income and subsidy are therefore essential to enable smaller music
venues to survive.

9. **Audiences aren't getting any younger.** One of the most surprising discussions on the day was that some venues are noticing that their audiences are growing older and that it was becoming increasingly difficult to attract a younger audience; it was suggested by some people that young audiences may be staying in and socialising online instead of going out to local music venues. I would like to speculate that some venues’ offer may not be what younger people are now looking for. For example, live music and alcohol has had a strong relationship for many years, with festivals in particular associated with heavy drinking. However, research in the UK appears to suggest that the proportion of young adults who reported that they do not drink alcohol at all increasing by more than 40% between 2005 and 2013, and it may be that live music is starting to move away from its traditional links with social drinking. In addition, venues, particularly those literally underground, may have poor or nonexistent wifi connections, which again may be putting younger audiences off. Could we, then, be heading for a return to 1950s coffee bars but this time with added superfast wifi connections?

10. **Are ticket levies the way forward?** A general gripe throughout the day from a number of attendees was about PRS for Music and the perceived lack of support for live music venues from PRS. One suggestion to help redistribute more funds to grassroots venues was for the UK to adopt the French model of a levy on tickets which would then be distributed to small venues and tours; in France, this is by organisations such as the Centre National de la Chanson des Variétés et du Jazz. Could PRS for Music do the same in the UK?

   All in all, it was another good event – hopefully Venues Day 2016 will see progress on all the points raised above and we look forward to the next instalment from the Music Venue Trust and Music Venues Alliance.