

# grassroots venues

**Shain Shapiro** of **Sound Diplomacy** on the threat to the music ecosystem if venues close

It takes a crisis to spring into action, fix something that is broken, tackle something that is wrong. For example, go back a few years and look at the outcry poured on the BBC when 6Music was threatened with closure. We have to accept that something is wrong, often, before we muster the courage and will to act.

I am writing this piece looking forward to an important few weeks' for our music industry. On October 19, the Mayor of London's Live Music Task Force will release its report, acknowledging a problem that requires intervention – the state of our grassroots music venues and nightclubs in London. In this report, a number of solutions are proposed, all aimed at changing the dialogue around how we talk about venues, nightclubs and the night time economy in policy, how they are treated as businesses and what can be done to prevent the next Madame Jo Jo's or Night & Day from closing down. The day after, hundreds of delegates will descend on Ministry of Sound for Venues Day. Here, the debate will continue with politicians, industry, venues operators and suppliers.

Many of us have acknowledged the problems faced by our venues in London and across the UK. And without them, the entire music development ecosystem fails. Without

grassroots music venues, artists have fewer places to beta-test content, build audiences, experiment and screw up. Labels and managers have fewer places to showcase, we get fewer festival headliners and so on. It is so pressing the BPI listed this challenge as one of its major policy initiatives this year and a number of organisations are lobbying for change, including the Music Venue Trust, Night Time Industries Association, Musicians Union and others. We just have to take the Eurostar to see the difference. Venues on the continent are heavily subsidised to the rate of 60% in France and 40% in Belgium. Here, we call them 'toilet' venues, fail to invest in their capacity and capabilities and as a result, many are closing.

This is because in the UK grassroots music venues, as a whole, are market failures. We can't ignore that. However, when a venue or nightclub is given more supportive treatment in our business rates, taxation and licensing system, its value increases the value of what is around it. A successful venue encourages accompanying eateries, bars and mini-cab firms, plus it supports cleaners, electricity providers, Thames water, staff, alcohol duty costs, PAYE and so on. If thought of differently, our venues are actually business incubators, and they incubate and support our music ecosystem. If supported,

each venue increases its area's night-time economy, raises land value and as a whole, makes our cities more exciting places to live. Without them, we lose not only a cultural offer; we also lose businesses that support multiple businesses – from the artists on stage to the toilet manufacturers in the back.

So as the Task Force report is launched and Venues Day is celebrated, we must propose solutions to supporting our venues. To do so, we need to understand what needs to change and what is wrong at the heart of this. This is not a venue-to-venue problem. It is a national issue. And it is called the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). In its core, it is fundamentally anti-creative industries. During the Con-Dem Coalition, the NPPF was reduced from 1400 odd pages to 72 in an effort to deregulate and spur house building. Our government is obsessed with house building and the NPPF, in its core, prioritises homes over everything else, creating a slash-and-burn mentality for anything that isn't a home. This is coupled with a policy that espouses that the value of the land, in law, is more important than what happens inside the building. As a result, six flats are more valuable than a music venue (or a library, or cultural centre, or studio). Homes, above anything else, lead this policy. We need more homes, but not at all costs.

Furthermore, the government introduced an amendment called 'permitted development', which allows developers or landowners to change a building's use without seeking planning consent. Pubs, offices and the like get converted to homes, but

often, these homes are poorly insulated and constructed. Increased land values increase density, which ends up with flats next to venues and in law, the flats always win.

Lastly, the safeguards used to protect cultural spaces can be reversed in court, such as Section 106 'community use' orders. Only a council application to the Secretary of State, called an Article 4, can save a space based what happens inside the building, rather than how much it is worth in square footage. However, Article 4s are complicated. They can only be applied post approval and only in particular areas. And these are rarely used for cultural purposes. Lastly, if a development does not return 20% profit to the landowner, it can be argued as being 'unviable' in law. The definition of viability, in planning law, means a 20% net return to the landowner of any potential development. Arguing that a build brings less than 20% forces councils to reduce affordable housing and cultural commitments, often through appeals and reversals of planners' decisions. We see this happen all over London and the UK.

In London, only three boroughs mention 'music venues' in their plans (Bromley, Brent & Camden). Only half a dozen UK cities have music strategies. As a result, venues close. Artists lose rehearsal space. Cities empty of creatives. We all suffer. Our ecosystem becomes threatened across the entire music industry.

The music industry does not understand planning law and planners, as a whole, are not in tune with our sector. This must change, and we must lead it. Let's start now.

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That event was filled with many of the key people you try all year to meet up with for drinks and chat and would kill to be face to face with