MUSIC VENUE TRUST

Submission to the Culture, Media and Sport Committee

In response to the Fan-Led Review of Live and Electronic Music (HC 1628, April 2026)

April 2026

Our Ask of the Committee

Music Venue Trust welcomes the Fan-Led Review of Live and Electronic Music (HC 1628) as a significant and carefully constructed piece of parliamentary work. Lord Brennan of Canton and the thousands of fans who contributed to it have produced an account of what live music means to communities across the UK, and what they want it to look like, that is accurate, generous and fully consistent with what the sector itself has been saying for years. We are grateful that the Committee commissioned it and proud that Le Pub Newport, one of MVT's community-owned venues, hosted its launch.

Our submission makes a single central ask; that the Committee read HC 1628 and HC 527 together, as the unified parliamentary statement they collectively constitute, and that it use its authority to hold the government to account against both reports simultaneously. Not as separate inquiries requiring separate responses, but as twin pillars of a single complete case.

The Committee occupies a position that no other body in this debate holds. Through its two reports, it has established both the structural diagnosis of the sector's condition and the public mandate for addressing it. HC 527 told the government what was wrong and what to do about it. HC 1628 has demonstrated, through the largest fan survey on these questions ever conducted by this Committee, that the public agrees. The government's response to HC 527 was inadequate. It now has two months to respond to HC 1628. We believe the Committee is best placed to ensure that response does not repeat the first's failings.

What follows is our chapter-by-chapter reading of HC 1628, structured around a consistent question; for each set of ambitions the fans have expressed, what is currently preventing their delivery, and what did the Committee's own earlier work identify as the route to making them achievable? We offer this not to instruct the Committee on its conclusions, but to provide the analytical thread between the two reports that we believe the government's response ought to address.

The Committee has done the hard work twice. It has diagnosed the problem and evidenced the public mandate. What it has not yet done is formally unite those two pieces of work into a single position that the government cannot answer with warm words and selective acceptance. That is what we are asking it to do now.

The Core Argument: Ambition Without Infrastructure

The Fan-Led Review's seven chapters describe, in aggregate, a vision of grassroots live music as vital cultural infrastructure; welcoming, diverse, safe, accessible, sustainably funded and deeply embedded in the communities it serves. This vision is exactly right. It is also, under current conditions, largely undeliverable.

Grassroots music venues ran a collective shortfall of £76.6 million in 2025, a figure HC 1628 itself cites at page 28, drawn from MVT's 2025 Annual Report. Average margins were 2.5%. More than half of all venues returned no profit. Thirty closed permanently in the same year that fans were telling the Fan-Led Review how vital they were. One hundred and seventy-five towns have no regular touring circuit. The sector that fans want to sustain is contracting at exactly the moment fans are being asked to articulate their ambitions for it.

The reason this matters for the Committee's scrutiny is not simply that the sector is struggling financially. It is that the ambitions of the Fan-Led Review are, almost without exception, downstream of a financially stable venue network. Better accessibility requires capital investment that venues cannot make from zero margin. Safer environments require staff training that takes time and money venue operators do not currently have. Diverse programming requires the financial resilience to take risks on artists without a guaranteed return. Published stage times require operational planning horizons that precarious trading makes impossible. The fans are describing what they want from venues that are, in many cases, fighting for their lives.

The review's own evidence makes this point more precisely than any external critique could. When HC 1628 looks for examples of what fan-centred, community-first, inclusive grassroots music looks like in practice, it finds The Black Box in Belfast and The Snug in Atherton, two venues operating on not-for-profit models, whose success the review explicitly attributes to local authority partnership and microgrant support. It launched at Le Pub in Newport, a venue now in community ownership through MVT's Music Venue Properties programme. The review found best practice where the financially challenging operating environment of the sector has been directly addressed, through ownership and/or public funding. The fans have described what they want, the review has found places where it already exists, and what those places have in common is that someone solved the money problem first.

This is not the Fan-Led Review's failure. Lord Brennan was explicitly asked to approach this work from the fans' perspective, and he has done so with skill and care. The Committee's task now is to connect that perspective to the structural reality, and to ask the government to account for the gap between them. HC 527 provided the detailed analysis of that structural reality and the policy interventions required to address it. HC 1628 provides the evidence that those interventions are publicly supported. We would welcome the Committee using its forthcoming evidence session with Lord Brennan, and its scrutiny of the government's response, to hold both documents together.

Grassroots music venues are not failing to deliver what fans want because they do not share the fans' values. They are failing to deliver it because they do not have the resources. The Committee identified the route to those resources in 2024. The question it might now put to the government is why, twenty-two months later, it has not taken it.

Chapter-by-Chapter: Connecting the Two Reports

Celebrating Live and Electronic Music

HC 1628's opening chapter establishes that fans want live music treated as a public good; celebrated by local authorities, supported through cultural strategies, given parity of esteem with other forms of public cultural provision, and recognised in the frameworks through which government supports cultural life. We note that 99% of fans in the Music Fans' Voice survey (a separate 2025 initiative gathering views from 8,108 fans, cited in HC 1628 at page 8) agreed that live music is a vital part of UK culture, and 95% felt it important for the UK's global reputation. These are not minority views.

What HC 1628's Celebration chapter makes visible, and what HC 527 approached from the sector's direction, is a structural gap in cultural policy; grassroots music venues are routinely excluded from the frameworks, funding programmes and planning assumptions through which government supports other forms of cultural infrastructure. Libraries are named in statutory local authority duties. Theatres benefit from Theatre Tax Relief and a range of capital grant programmes. Museums receive direct public investment as a matter of course. Sports facilities benefit from national investment programmes through Sport England and equivalent bodies. The principle that public money should support spaces providing irreplaceable public cultural benefit is well established across all of these. It has not been extended to grassroots music venues with anything like the same consistency.

We would welcome the Committee considering whether to ask the government if it regards GMVs as cultural infrastructure, and, if it does, how it proposes to reflect that recognition in the specific programmes, frameworks and policy statements through which it supports cultural infrastructure generally. That question did not arise directly from HC 527, which focused on the sector's immediate fiscal crisis. HC 1628's broader cultural framing creates a fresh opportunity to press it.

The fiscal case from HC 527 at paragraphs 59 and 60 remains relevant; a targeted VAT cut based on venue capacity would give the sector the operating margin from which cultural investment, programming diversity and community engagement become affordable. The UK taxes grassroots tickets at 20%, double Germany's rate, quadruple France's, and at an infinite multiple of Norway's, which applies zero. The Celebration chapter also raises the broader question of whether DCMS cultural planning guidance formally includes grassroots music venues as a named category of asset deserving support. We believe it should, and we would welcome the Committee seeking the government's position on this.

Ticketing

HC 1628's Ticketing chapter reflects consistent fan demands; an end to secondary market exploitation, transparent fees from the first moment of a transaction, resistance to dynamic pricing, standardised accessible ticketing, and clear refund rights at the point of sale. The Committee will note that these recommendations broadly align with measures the government has already signalled, including the ban on resale above face value announced in November 2025.

The connection to HC 527 that matters most here is the levy. HC 1628's survey data at page 74 is unambiguous; fans are supportive of an arena and stadium levy to redistribute resources to grassroots venues, emerging artists and independent promoters. HC 527 at paragraphs 40 to 43 recommended exactly this mechanism, with a statutory backstop if the voluntary approach proved inadequate. The voluntary approach has not reached its targets. It was to have covered 50% of qualifying tickets by 31 December 2025; current compliance is approximately 30%. The LIVE Trust, founded on the model pioneered by Enter Shikari and MVT and credited as such in HC 1628 at page 29, has distributed over £500,000 and is doing genuinely important work. At its projected 2026 receipts of £5 million, however, it addresses approximately 6.5% of a £76.6 million sector shortfall, even before accounting for the share directed to artists and promoters rather than venues.

We would encourage the Committee to use its scrutiny of the government's response to HC 1628 to press for the specific commitments HC 527 identified as necessary; a public date on which the voluntary approach will be formally assessed, a defined threshold for success, and confirmation that the forthcoming ticketing legislation will include a mandatory levy power, as HC 1628's Grassroots Fans' Charter explicitly calls for. The fan survey has now provided the public mandate the government said it needed. We would ask the Committee to consider whether the government should be permitted to treat the genuine but partial progress of the LIVE Trust as grounds for indefinite deferral of that question.

Grassroots

This is the chapter of HC 1628 most directly continuous with HC 527, and the Committee will recognise its own earlier work reflected throughout it. HC 1628's financial data on the sector, the 2.5% average margin and the £76.6 million shortfall, is drawn directly from MVT's 2025 Annual Report, the same source used in the Committee's 2024 inquiry. The 88% of fans who attended a small local venue in the past three years, the 93% who found them good value for money, and the 58% who have experienced a closure since 2020 together represent a public mandate the Committee's own 2024 recommendation for a fan-led review was designed to generate. It has now done so with remarkable clarity.

We would draw the Committee's attention to three specific interventions from HC 527 that are directly mirrored in HC 1628's Grassroots Fans' Charter. HC 527 at paragraph 95 recommended statutory Agent of Change. HC 1628's Fans' Charter calls for the same across the whole of the UK. Amendment 41 to the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill placed that principle in primary legislation for England; passed by the House of Lords, it was rejected by the House of Commons on the grounds that statutory provision was "not necessary." The consequence of that position is that every time a developer seeks to circumvent the principle, MVT, venues and their supporters must meet the legal and professional costs of enforcing it through the planning system; an average of £20,000 per case, rising to £50,000 or more in complex cases, with the sector increasingly dependent on charitable public donations simply to uphold a planning principle the government's own policy already endorses. We would invite the Committee to press the government on what it intends to do next; if updating NPPF guidance remains its position, MVT's view is that it must establish a transparent annual fund of £1.5 million to meet the legal costs its own policy generates, so that government, sector and public can make an informed judgment about whether that expenditure is a more proportionate use of money than placing the principle in statute.

The government's 15% relief for live music venues in 2026/27, followed by a real-terms freeze through 2028/29, provides a three-year window that HC 527 at paragraph 64 called for. The question the Committee might now put is what the government intends to do with it; the current Fair Maintainable Trade methodology calculates rateable value on income alone, with no mechanism to account for the cost of delivering the activity that generates that income, and the case for establishing a cultural premises classification within the VOA's valuation framework, with a modified FMT that treats the cost of cultural delivery as a structural deduction, is one the government has created the conditions to act on. HC 527 at paragraphs 59 and 60 recommended a targeted VAT cut; the sector financial data in HC 1628 confirms the conditions that made that recommendation necessary have not improved. We would suggest the Committee consider treating the Grassroots chapter of HC 1628 as a direct evidential update to its own 2024 report, and use it to ask the government to explain what has changed in its assessment of these interventions in the twenty-two months since it declined to implement them.

HC 1628 also introduces a recommendation absent from HC 527; that the sector adopt a presumption against exclusivity practices such as radius clauses. We welcome this. It is primarily a matter of industry culture rather than legislation, but government endorsement of the principle in its response to HC 1628 would materially accelerate progress, and we would welcome the Committee seeking that endorsement.

Safety

HC 1628's Safety chapter calls for consistent welfare and safeguarding training for all venue staff, clear reporting mechanisms for harassment and assault, better coordination between venues and local authorities on safety planning, access to harm reduction services including drug checking, free drinking water at all events, and hearing protection readily available. We would invite the Committee to read these recommendations alongside the financial data HC 1628 itself provides at page 28; a sector operating on zero margin in more than half of its venues cannot systematically deliver the safety infrastructure fans rightly expect.

The argument we would ask the Committee to explore goes beyond the fiscal interventions in HC 527, important as those are. Successive governments have designed and funded programmes to support safety and welfare improvements in public-facing cultural buildings. Historic England administers grant programmes for the improvement of listed cultural buildings. Arts Council England supports capital investment in arts venues. The logic of those programmes, that buildings serving a genuine public cultural purpose deserve public support in meeting the standards their communities need, applies directly to grassroots music venues. In practice, that logic has not reached them in any systematic way.

We would ask the Committee to explore whether the government will ensure grassroots music venues are explicitly eligible for capital improvement funding through DCMS, ACE and other relevant bodies, with application processes and eligibility criteria designed around how this sector actually operates rather than how larger arts organisations do. HC 527 touched on the accessibility of public funding at paragraph 75. HC 1628's Safety chapter gives that broader question a specific set of investment priorities around which a concrete answer could be developed.

Accessibility

HC 1628's Accessibility chapter calls for a minimum of 2% of venue capacity allocated to wheelchair spaces, with local authorities required to embed this in planning conditions for new and refurbished venues. It calls for a UK-wide disability access kitemark for third-party providers, EHRC guidance on reasonable adjustments, and venues providing clear layout information and virtual walkthroughs. We note that HC 1628 at pages 47 to 48 acknowledges that smaller venues, particularly those in listed buildings, face structural constraints in making these improvements. That acknowledgement is correct; it is also incomplete without an account of what should be done about it.

The Committee is well placed to supply that account, because the principle it requires is already established in other areas of cultural policy. The Heritage Lottery Fund (now the National Lottery Heritage Fund) has since its establishment in 1994 invested significantly in accessibility improvements to historic cultural buildings, theatres, museums, heritage sites and civic spaces, on the explicit logic that buildings of public cultural importance should be accessible to all members of the public. HC 1628 at page 28 confirms that 88% of fans have attended a small local music venue in the past three years and that 94% of Music Fans' Voice respondents believe culturally significant venues should have some form of protected status. That public evidence establishes precisely the same public value argument. It has not, however, been used to unlock equivalent investment for this category of venue.

We would invite the Committee to consider recommending that the government establish a specific accessibility improvement pathway for grassroots music venues, with grant scales, application processes and eligibility criteria appropriate to how the sector operates. The policy rationale is not new; it is the application to one category of cultural infrastructure of a principle government has applied to virtually every other. We would welcome the Committee seeking a specific answer on this rather than a general commitment to keep the matter under review.

Transport

HC 1628's Transport chapter calls for research into late-night mobility gaps, alignment of transport schedules with venue closing times, accessible transport provision, and an industry-wide standard for publishing stage start and finish times. These recommendations are primarily addressed to local authorities, transport operators and the Department for Transport, and we support them in those directions.

There is, however, a connection between transport and venue economics that we would invite the Committee to highlight. HC 1628's survey data at page 77 shows that fans have mixed views on earlier closing times; they want to get home safely, but they find curfews reductive of the experience they came for. Venue operators understand this tension acutely, because bar revenue is the primary operating income for most venues below 800 capacity, a crossover point established in MVT's 2025 Annual Report where food and beverage income exceeds ticket income at every capacity band below that threshold. Earlier closing times, which transport networks require, reduce bar revenue, which many venues need to remain solvent. This is a genuine conflict between two legitimate public interests. It can only be resolved by giving venues an income model that does not depend entirely on late-night alcohol sales; and that income model depends on the fiscal conditions HC 527 recommended and the government declined to provide.

Liverpool's N1 Night Bus, cited as a positive model in HC 1628, was built through a partnership between the city region authority, a transport operator and a network of cultural venues. We would suggest the Committee consider inviting both DCMS and the Department for Transport to set out how that model of joint working might be supported nationally, so that the transport connectivity fans need and the operational stability venues need are pursued as complementary rather than competing goals.

Fan Voice

HC 1628's Fan Voice chapter calls for a government and industry-funded Music Fans Association, regular local authority live music forums, and a government-commissioned annual fans' survey from 2027. We support all three and would welcome the Committee seeking firm commitments on the seed funding and timeline HC 1628 calls for.

We draw the Committee's attention to a finding in HC 1628 that deserves more than a passing reference. Page 81 records that 66% of respondents would consider purchasing community shares in their local music venue if it gave them a say in how it was run. This is the most substantial evidence yet produced that fan appetite for participation in grassroots music extends well beyond attendance. Fans want to own and govern the venues they love.

MVT's Music Venue Properties programme has demonstrated that this appetite can be converted into durable structural protection. Seven venue freeholds, The Snug Atherton, The Ferret Preston, Le Pub Newport, Bunkhouse Swansea, Booking Hall Dover, Joiners Southampton and Croft Bristol, are now in community ownership, governed by their fans and communities, and structurally protected from the developer and landlord pressures that close so many others. The 66% figure in HC 1628 suggests that what MVP has achieved at seven venues could be scaled substantially, if the conditions for community acquisition were better supported.

We would invite the Committee to consider recommending that the government develop a supported pathway for community acquisition of at-risk grassroots music venues, modelled on the community ownership frameworks that already exist for community pubs and sports facilities. This would connect the fan ownership appetite HC 1628 has evidenced to the practical mechanism MVP has already demonstrated works. It would also give the Music Fans Association a tangible early purpose; helping fans understand and act on the opportunity to take ownership of the venues they want to protect.

Fan voice without fan agency is advocacy. Fan voice with community ownership behind it is structural change. We would welcome the Committee recommending both.

Questions We Would Invite the Committee to Put to the Government

In its evidence session with Lord Brennan and in its scrutiny of the government's formal response to HC 1628, we would encourage the Committee to seek specific answers to the following questions. We offer them as questions for the Committee to consider rather than demands on the government, because the Committee's authority to extract meaningful answers is what this submission is ultimately about.

On the unification of the two reports: Does the government accept that HC 1628 and HC 527 together constitute a complete case for action, and will its response to HC 1628 address the outstanding recommendations from HC 527 that it declined to implement in 2024?

On Agent of Change: Amendment 41, placing the principle in primary legislation, was passed by the House of Lords and rejected by the House of Commons. The government's stated reason was that statutory provision was "not necessary." What does the government propose to do instead to ensure venues are not left meeting the legal costs of enforcing its own planning policy? If it maintains that NPPF guidance is sufficient, will it establish a fund to meet those enforcement costs, and submit monthly case-by-case reporting to MHCLG so that parliament can assess whether that is a proportionate approach?

On the mandatory levy: What is the government's definition of success for the voluntary approach? What is the date on which it will make a public determination? Will the forthcoming ticketing legislation include a mandatory levy power, as HC 1628's Grassroots Fans' Charter specifically calls for?

On VAT: HC 527 at paragraphs 59 and 60 called for a temporary targeted VAT cut and a comprehensive economic analysis of its impact. The government declined both. Will it now commission the analysis it declined in 2024? On what grounds does it maintain its objection to VAT relief for a sector that comparable economies support at rates between zero and 10%?

On business rates: The government's 15% relief and real-terms freeze through 2028/29 create a three-year window for structural reform. Will the government use it to establish a cultural premises classification within the VOA's valuation framework, with a modified FMT calculation that accounts for the cost of cultural delivery as a structural deduction against rateable value? A review of pub valuation methodology is already in scope; the case for GMVs is the same argument and stronger.

On grassroots venues as cultural infrastructure: Does the government consider grassroots music venues to be cultural infrastructure equivalent in public value to the theatres, museums, heritage sites and sports facilities that receive systematic public investment? If so, how does it propose to reflect that in the capital grant programmes, planning frameworks and cultural strategy guidance through which it supports other forms of cultural infrastructure?

On accessibility capital investment: Will the government establish an accessibility improvement pathway for grassroots music venues, drawing on the precedent of public investment in accessibility in other historic cultural buildings, with application processes appropriate to how this sector actually operates?

On community ownership: In light of HC 1628's finding that 66% of fans would consider purchasing community shares in their local venue, will the government develop a supported community acquisition pathway for at-risk grassroots music venues, modelled on the community ownership frameworks already in place for pubs and sports facilities?

On the Music Fans Association: Will the government provide seed funding and a clear timeline for the establishment of a Music Fans Association? Will its design allow engagement with the venue sector as a partner in community ownership and governance, rather than solely as a subject of policy representation?

The Committee commissioned a fan-led review because it believed fans had not been heard. They have now spoken, clearly and at scale, in support of exactly the things the Committee's own 2024 report identified as necessary. The Committee's authority is at its highest at precisely this moment. The questions above represent the test of whether the government heard either report.