

WIGAN GRASSROOTS

Music Plan



Wigan
Council



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FOREWORD

Rachael McEntee CEO OF THE SNUG

I grew up in Atherton, on the Hag Fold estate in Wigan Borough. As a kid, I would listen to my uncle telling stories about going into Manchester to watch bands like James, The Stone Roses and Happy Mondays in tiny venues before they became household names.

He spoke about music like it was magic. Like it was this whole other world full of energy, creativity and possibility. To me, Manchester may as well have been another country. I lived right by Hag Fold train station. I could hear the trains passing every hour, but getting on one and heading into the city felt impossible at that age. Music scenes, gigs, venues and culture all felt like things that happened somewhere else, to other people.

Then, at sixteen years old, me and a friend got the train into Manchester on our own for the first time to watch James at GMEX. We got there ridiculously early because we had no idea where we were going. We stood right at the front, got thrown around in the crowd, my friend lost her shoes, and the support act came on. Little did we know, we were watching Radiohead before they became one of the biggest bands in the world.

That night something changed in me. From then on, music became more than just songs. It became identity, belonging, adventure and connection.

Every Wednesday for years I would buy the NME, excited to discover what bands were



playing that weekend.

I'd sit reading it on the bus to work, circling gig listings and phoning my mates to plan where we were going next. We trusted venues like Night & Day, Roadhouse and Ruby Lounge because we knew that even if we'd never heard of the band, something special might happen there.

And often it did.

We saw bands on tiny stages before they became stadium acts. We followed music around the country because we loved that feeling of discovery. The feeling of being there at the beginning. I still think one of the greatest joys in music is hearing someone say, "I saw them before they made it."

But behind every great band, every iconic venue and every music scene, there are people slogging it out because they believe culture matters. Promoters taking risks. Venue owners struggling to keep the lights on. Artists travelling hundreds of miles for little money. Fans buying tickets, T shirts and CDs because they want to support something they love.

Grassroots music has always been powered by passion long before profit.

When I was younger, nobody ever suggested music as a career path. Careers advice was about fitting into boxes. Office jobs, safe jobs, practical jobs. Nobody explained that there were careers in live music, promotion, sound engineering, programming, management, production or cultural leadership. Yet these industries shape lives, local economies and communities every single day.

After being made redundant and becoming a single parent, I found myself completely lost. Music had always been the thing that kept me going. Knowing there was a gig to go to after work often got me through difficult days. I started imagining a space that could bring people together around music without everything revolving around alcohol. A small coffee shop with live music, creativity and community at its heart.

That became The Snug.

Over ten years later, I've watched the power that grassroots music spaces can have on people's lives. Through projects such as The Early Doors Club, Sound Her Out and community led live music programmes across the borough, I've seen first-hand how music can transform places and people. I've seen audiences return to town centres, independent businesses benefit from cultural activity, women gain confidence in music spaces, young people discover pathways into the industry and communities reconnect through shared experiences.

These projects have shown that grassroots music is not simply entertainment. It is community infrastructure. It supports wellbeing,

local economies, social connection and civic pride.

During lockdown, I joined a huge online call organised by Music Venue Trust alongside hundreds of independent venues from across the country. For the first time, I realised we were all fighting the same battles. All trying to protect spaces that mattered deeply to people. That moment changed my perspective completely. It made me realise that grassroots music venues are not side notes to culture. They are the foundation of it.

Over the years, my work through The Snug has led me into wider conversations around grassroots music nationally. Through sitting on advisory groups including the Greater Manchester Music Commission, attending music conferences and speaking alongside industry leaders from across the UK, I've seen first-hand both the opportunities and the challenges facing grassroots music culture today.

What has become clear is that places like Wigan matter enormously within the wider music ecosystem. Talent does not only come from major cities. It grows in towns, communities, youth clubs, pubs, cafés, church halls and independent venues where people are given the chance to belong, experiment and be heard.

This plan has also been shaped through the hard work, conversations and the belief of many people who care deeply about music and culture in Wigan Borough. In particular, I want to recognise Ben Morgan, who has worked tirelessly alongside me on developing this vision, and the support and guidance of the Music Venue Trust team, whose advocacy for grassroots venues across the country has inspired so much of this work.

I am also incredibly proud that The Snug became the first venue saved through Music Venue Properties under the Own Our Venues initiative. That moment was not just about saving a building. It was about recognising that grassroots music venues are cultural assets worth protecting for future generations.

This music plan is about recognising that value properly.

It is about ensuring that young people growing up in Wigan Borough today do not feel that music, creativity and culture only happen somewhere else. It is about creating pathways into music and the creative industries. It is about supporting venues, artists, promoters and communities so that talent can grow here, not just leave here.

Madchester did not begin with a strategy document. It began with people, passion, venues and belief. Imagine what could have happened if those scenes had been recognised, supported and invested in from the very beginning.

Now imagine what could happen here in Wigan if we choose to do exactly that.

We already have the talent. We already have the stories. We already have the communities and the creativity.

Now we have a plan.

Let's make Wigan the new destination for music.

WIGAN'S MUSICAL HERITAGE

Wigan is a town with a rich and storied musical heritage.

Its musical history dates back to the 1940s with George Formby, at one point the biggest act in the UK. Fast-forward to the 1970s and Wigan made its mark on global music culture through the legendary Wigan Casino, voted the best club in the world by Billboard magazine, ahead even of New York's Studio 54. The venue became a spiritual home for the Northern Soul movement, attracting crowds from across the country.

The 1980s saw Wigan contribute to the synth-pop

and indie movement with acts like Kajagoogoo and The Railway Children, who signed to Factory Records. The 1990s and early 2000s brought a wave of acclaimed bands like The Verve, Witness, and Starsailor, all hailing from the town or its surrounding areas.

Even when the live music scene dipped in the late '90s, efforts from the Wigan Music Collective and later Lupine kept the fire burning. Clubs like The Pier and Northern Lights @ Club Nirvana pulled in hundreds each weekend, showing a real hunger for live and alternative music experiences.

However, in recent years Wigan, like many towns across the UK, has faced the closure of key venues, loss of cultural infrastructure, and a lack of strategic investment in its grassroots music scene. Rising costs, planning pressures, and inconsistent support for promoters and artists have fragmented the ecosystem. While passionate local efforts have kept things alive, there's been no joined-up approach to help the sector grow.

LOCAL IMPACT AND RESURGENCE

In Wigan, these national pressures are felt locally. The borough has experienced venue closures, reduced touring access and uneven investment over recent decades.

Despite that, Wigan's music scene is organically building momentum again. Independent venues like The Snug, Indiependence, The Old Courts, Boulevard, & Monaco are nurturing local talent and community. Projects like The Early Doors Club are creating space for new audiences and early-career artists.

“Grassroots music remains the foundation of the UK music industry.

It is where new talent is nurtured, where communities come together, and where local economies are strengthened through cultural participation. Without a healthy grassroots layer, the wider music industry cannot sustain long-term growth.“

Alongside this resurgence, Wigan has also produced nationally successful contemporary acts. The Lottery Winners and The Lathums, both rooted in the borough, have collectively achieved four UK number one albums between them. This level of commercial success is significant within the current national backdrop and demonstrates that artists emerging from Wigan's grassroots ecosystem can reach the highest levels of the industry. Their continued association with the borough provides visible progression pathways for younger artists and reinforces the message that success does not have to mean severing local identity.

Wigan also occupies a unique position within the current national conversation around grassroots music and the creative industries. In 2025, the UK Government's Creative Industries Sector Plan, led by Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and MP for Wigan, Rt Hon Lisa Nandy MP, placed music, grassroots venues and cultural infrastructure at the centre of national economic and cultural policy. Alongside significant new investment into the creative industries nationally and across Greater Manchester, this creates a timely opportunity for Wigan Borough to strengthen and coordinate its own grassroots music ecosystem.

FROM WIGAN TO THE WORLD

Alongside the wider policy developments shaping grassroots music nationally and regionally, the last five years have also demonstrated the cultural impact that artists and organisations from Wigan Borough can have at a national level. These examples highlight not only creative success, but the importance of artists continuing to champion and reinvest in the places they come from.

The Lathums provide a strong example of how grassroots infrastructure can support nationally recognised artists. Formed through The Music Project in Pemberton, the band progressed from local rehearsal spaces and grassroots venues to achieving a UK number one album and performing major hometown shows at Robin Park Arena. Their development highlights the long-term value of local music education, rehearsal infrastructure and grassroots performance opportunities in supporting artist progression within the borough.

Alongside their commercial success, the band have also continued to support community and cultural activity locally. This includes involvement in campaigns to support Wigan Athletic during its financial crisis, including releasing a limited 7" vinyl record to raise funds for the club, alongside support for youth and cultural initiatives such as Curious Minds' Chance To See Fund, helping improve access to arts and cultural experiences for young people across the borough.

The Lottery Winners' headline show at Leigh Sports Village represented another significant cultural milestone for the borough. As the first band from Leigh to achieve a UK number one album, the event demonstrated both the long-term potential of grassroots artist development and the importance of enabling major cultural moments within the towns that make up Wigan Borough. Rather than relocating the event externally, the decision to stage the show in Leigh reinforced local identity and highlighted how large-scale cultural activity can strengthen civic pride and visibility across the borough.

Large-scale hometown performances have also continued through Richard Ashcroft's Robin Park shows, which combined nationally significant live music events with opportunities to platform local artists. Support slots for acts such as Maxwell Varey demonstrated how major events can create visibility and progression opportunities for emerging musicians within the local ecosystem.

Together, these examples highlight the wider value of retaining strong connections between successful artists and their local cultural infrastructure. They demonstrate how grassroots music can contribute not only to artist development, but also to civic identity, cultural participation, community visibility and opportunities for future generations of musicians across Wigan Borough.

THE WIDER PICTURE

The UK music industry continues to be one of the country's most valuable creative sectors, contributing an estimated £8 billion ⁽¹⁾ to the UK economy in 2025 and supporting more than 220,000 jobs nationwide ⁽¹⁾. Live music remains a central pillar of this success, drawing millions of audiences to concerts and festivals each year and generating significant economic and cultural impact, with the industry growing 9.5% in 2025 to reach a total value of £6.7bn. ⁽²⁾

However, beneath these headline figures, the grassroots music sector, the foundation of the entire live music ecosystem, remains fragile. 58% of respondents to the 2025 Music Fans Voice survey had experienced closure of a locally significant music venue or nightclub in their area since 2020 ⁽³⁾

The Music Venue Trust's 2025 Annual Report highlights that more than half of the UK's grassroots music venues failed to make a profit last year, with 53% showing no profit in 2025 ⁽⁴⁾. Many venues continue to operate on margins of less than 1% ⁽⁴⁾, leaving them highly vulnerable to rising costs, changes in audience behaviour and wider economic pressures.

Touring circuits have also contracted – with artists playing 11 shows on average in 2024, compared to 22 in 1994. ⁽⁵⁾ An increasing number of towns and smaller cities like Wigan are being skipped by professional tours, reducing opportunities for emerging artists to build audiences locally. Combined with ongoing cost pressures, the ability for new acts to develop sustainable careers has become significantly more challenging than a decade ago.

**£8
BILLION**

Contributed to the UK Economy by the Music Industry

**£6.7
BILLION**

Value of the Live Music Sector in 2025, with 9.5% Growth

220,000

Jobs Supported

58%

of Music Fans Report Losing a Local Venue Since 2020

53%

of Grassroots Venues Made No Profit in 2025

**TOURING
DECLINE**

Artists Now Tour Fewer Locations, Averaging 11 Shows Compared to 22 in 1994

**TIGHT
MARGINS**

Many Grassroots Venues Operate on Margins of Less Than 1%, Leaving Almost No Room For Rising Costs

THE LAST 5 YEARS

2021

In 2019, UK Music and Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) published the Greater Manchester Music Review ⁽⁶⁾ which included ten recommendations on how the city region could support and develop music in Greater Manchester. One of the recommendations was the formation of a Greater Manchester Music Commission.

In May 2021, GMCA established the Commission, which meets four times a year. Mayor Andy Burnham is the political lead for the Greater Manchester Music Commission, with support from co-chairs.

2022

The Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre, published “Live Music Ecologies in the UK – A local perspective in the context of the pandemic.” ⁽⁷⁾ Led by Nesta and funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council as part of the UK Government’s Industrial Strategy, the Centre comprised a consortium of universities and one joint enterprise from across the UK (Birmingham, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Work Advance, London School of Economics, Manchester, Newcastle, Sussex, and Ulster).

This landmark report recognised the “economic, social and cultural value of live music and live music venues to the region; that planning, liquor licensing, environmental, health, culture and city regeneration strategies take greater account of the actual and potential contribution of live music than has sometimes historically been the case.” Acknowledging the “linkages between matters like property ownership and how these feed into cultural activity”.

2023

2023 was a pivotal year in addressing the policy points raised in “Live Music Ecologies in the UK” and Wigan led the way. Starting with the October 2023 purchase of The Snug, by Music Venue Properties, securing this cultural landmark for generations to come, kick starting a movement to secure venues via community ownership. ⁽⁸⁾ This pioneering approach has since gone on to establish 6 (and counting) other projects across the UK.

2024

2024 saw the Culture Media and Sport Select Committee commission an inquiry into Grassroots Music Venues. ⁽⁹⁾ Recommendations from this report were instrumental in the formation of the LIVE Trust, a mechanism designed to distribute £1 per ticket from Major Concerts to many institutions within the Grassroots sector.

2025

Planning: A Practical Guide

With Greater Manchester addressing the impact of a growing population and increased demand for new residential development, construction is often proposed near concentrations of cultural and night time activity. This can create potential for tension between existing cultural organisations and new residents.

To encourage best practice during the planning process, which both protects existing cultural spaces and encourages acceptable amenity and residential quality, Music Venue Trust partnered with the Greater Manchester Music Commission to create a one-stop planning guide for Grassroots Music Venue operators.

The guide provides the tools needed to navigate the planning system and, where necessary, to empower operators to submit effective consultation representations. The guide was designed to be replicable, and versions now exist in Brighton and Sheffield, with more variants planned.

In 2025 the Government announced its creative industries sector plan. This modern industrial strategy had music at its heart, driven by Secretary of State for Culture Media and Sport and MP for Wigan, Rt Hon Lisa Nandy MP. This strategy included £25 million in funding for the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) to boost its creative industries as part of a wider £380 million national sector plan. A £30 million Music Growth Package was also announced to support emerging artists, strengthen grassroots venues, and boost international touring.

Following on from recommendations in the Culture, Media & Sport (CMS) inquiry into Grassroots Music Venues, the music fan was nationally recognised as central to the live music ecosystem. The year kicked off with the Music Fans Voice Survey (the first major UK Music Fan Survey, with over 8000 respondents, commissioned by, Greater Manchester Combined Authority, The Mayor of London, Liverpool City Region Combined Authority, West Midlands Combined Authority, Tees Valley Combined Authority, Belfast City Council, Cardiff City Council and Glasgow Music City, with support from West Yorkshire Combined Authority, Brighton and Hove City Council and Southend City Council.)

Building upon these findings, in June 2025, the CMS committee commissioned Lord Brennan of Canton to undertake a major "Fan Led Review of Live and Electronic Music."⁽¹⁰⁾

Manchester Music City and Manchester City Council published the Music in the City report, reinforcing the importance of grassroots music venues as essential cultural infrastructure and highlighting the need for coordinated support across the sector.

After a successful pilot project between Enter Shikari and Music Venue Trust, the first shows with the £1 per ticket levy directed to the newly formed LIVE Trust began.

2026

January 2026 was a significant month as the LIVE Trust began its first wave of distributions, supporting infrastructure and artists projects across the UK. £500,000 was distributed to grassroots organisations and preparation for Phase 2 in June 2026 are underway.

The CMS committee Fan Led Review of Live and Electronic Music, authored by Lord Kevin Brennan was published in March. This 100 page report also came with the launch of a Live Music Charter. The 7 principles of this charter, cover Celebration of Live and Electronic Music, Ticketing, Grassroots, Safety, Accessibility, Transport and the Fans Voice. This report highlights many projects taking place in Greater Manchester, which were highlighted through consultations led by the Greater Manchester Music Commission.

A PIVOTAL MOMENT

Now is the time for Wigan to shape its own strategy. To amplify what's working, to identify where support is needed, and to ensure the borough builds on its current momentum rather than being left behind. With growing grassroots activity, new local initiatives, and the continued development of the Greater Manchester music ecosystem, there is a clear opportunity to put Wigan firmly back on the music map and create a more sustainable future for its scene

Wigan has the opportunity not only to respond to the challenges facing the sector, but to position itself as a confident and collaborative contributor to the wider regional and national music landscape.

This strategy is therefore both timely and necessary: an opportunity to ensure that Wigan's grassroots scene is not simply surviving within a fragile national environment, but strengthening, connecting and thriving for the long term.

METHODOLOGY

This grassroots music plan has been developed through a combination of quantitative research, public consultation and stakeholder engagement to capture the experiences of those involved in Wigan Borough's music ecosystem.

Public Survey

A borough-wide online survey was launched to gather insight from musicians, venues, promoters, educators and audiences. The survey was distributed through social media, venue networks and partner organisations.

The survey explored key themes including access to venues and rehearsal spaces, transport and accessibility, funding awareness, artist development opportunities and audience behaviours. Respondents were also asked to provide the first line of their postcode to allow geographic analysis across the borough. The survey has received over 300 responses, providing a substantial dataset to support the findings of the consultation process.

Public Consultation Event

A public consultation event brought together 58 representatives from across the borough's music community, including artists, venues, promoters and educators.

Participants took part in facilitated table discussions responding to three questions: what is currently working in the borough's music scene, what the key barriers are, and what the future could look like. Each table identified three priority issues which were shared with the wider group and voted on by participants to highlight the most important challenges and opportunities.

Focus Groups and Stakeholder Conversations

Focus Groups and Stakeholder Conversations A series of targeted focus groups and one-to-one conversations were held with key groups within the local music ecosystem. These included venue operators, musicians, promoters, electronic music communities, accessibility organisations and community groups.

These discussions provided deeper insight into specific challenges such as infrastructure

needs, accessibility barriers, artist progression pathways and the operational realities of running venues.

Desk Research

Desk research was undertaken alongside the consultation process to understand national trends affecting the grassroots music sector. This included reviewing reports and data from organisations such as Music Venue Trust, UK Music and Arts Council England to contextualise Wigan's challenges within the wider national landscape.

Evidence Analysis

The recommendations within this plan are based on themes that consistently emerged across the survey results, consultation event, focus groups and stakeholder conversations. This combined approach ensures the strategy reflects both quantitative evidence and lived experience from across Wigan Borough's music community.

Consultation Representation

While the consultation engaged a broad range of stakeholders across the borough, survey participation from under-25 respondents was comparatively limited, representing 7.2% of total responses. This reflects a wider challenge around engaging younger audiences through traditional survey methods and highlights the need for continued targeted youth engagement as the strategy develops.

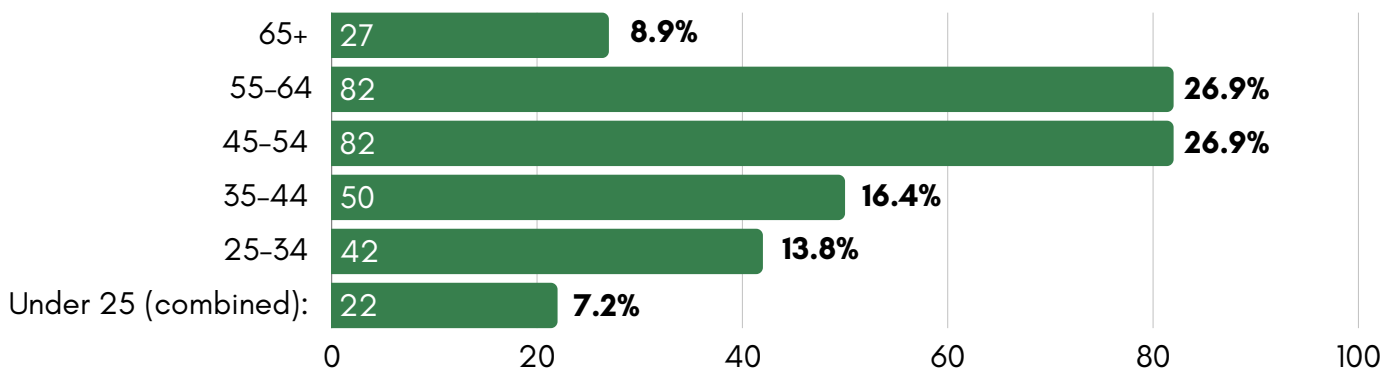
SURVEY STATS

Participation

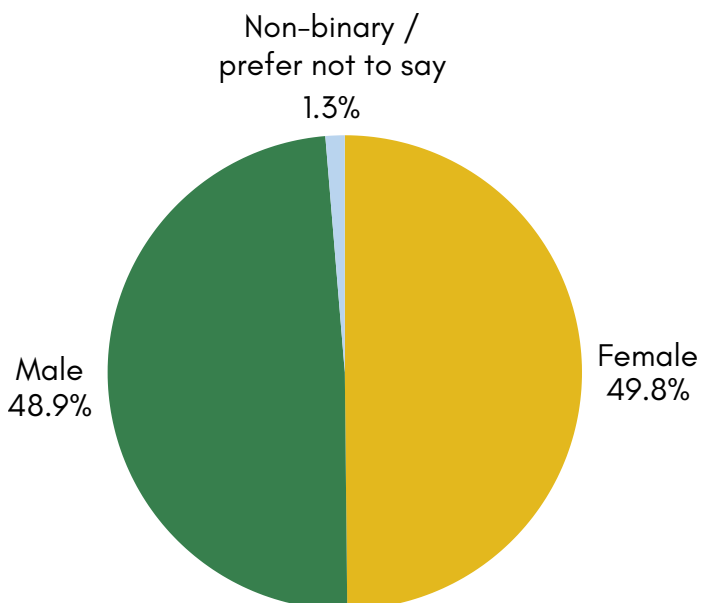
- Total respondents: 305
- Responses collected across multiple postcode areas within Wigan Borough

Who We Heard From

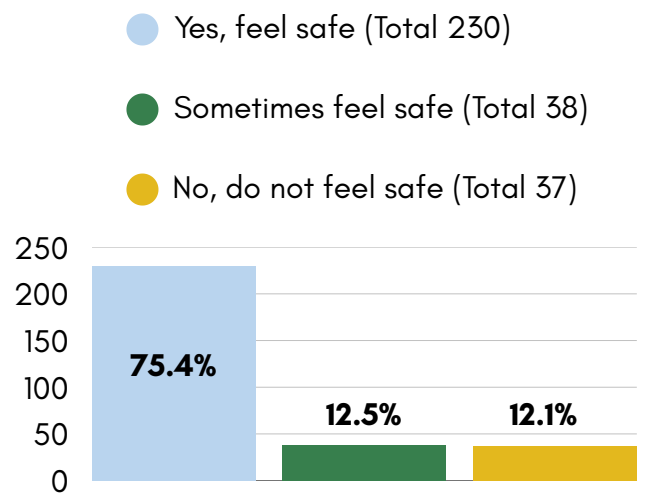
Age Distribution



Gender

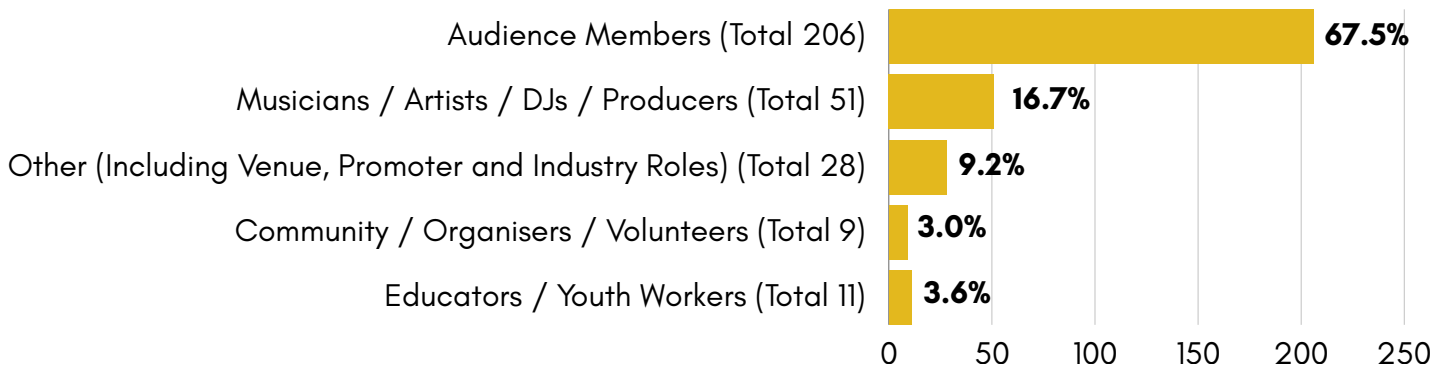


Perception of Safety at Night

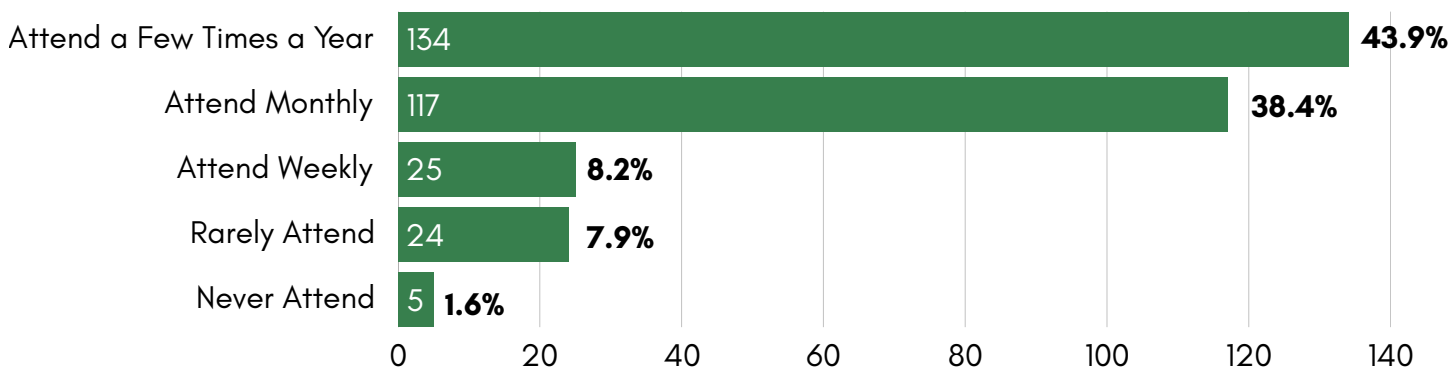


Female respondents were 29.4% more likely than male respondents to express safety concerns when attending gigs at night. This rises to 36.8% when respondents identified as artists.

Role in the Music Ecosystem

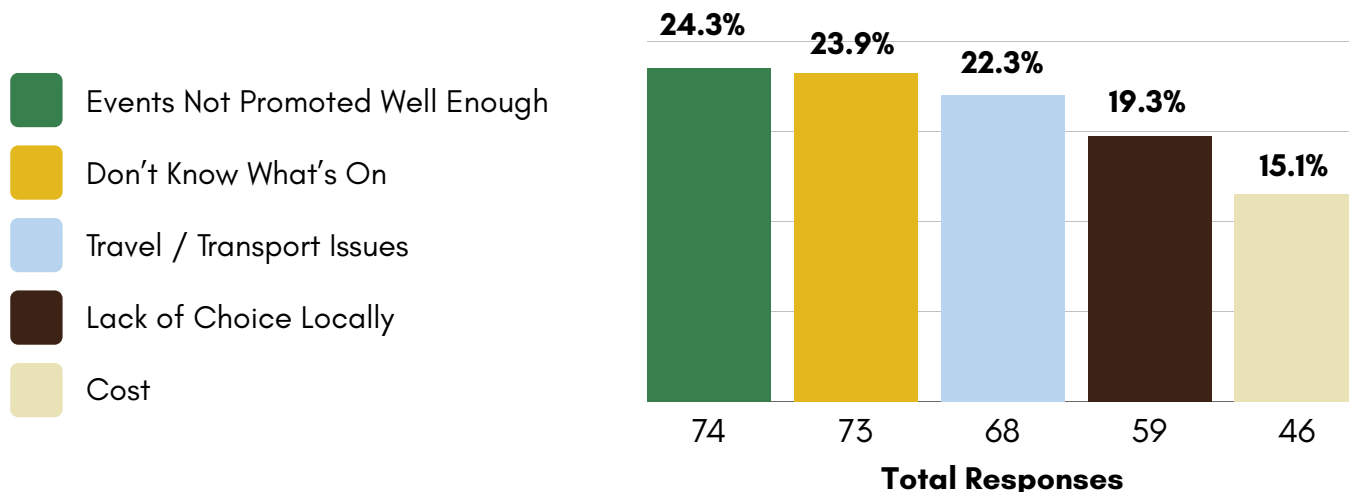


Engagement with Live Music

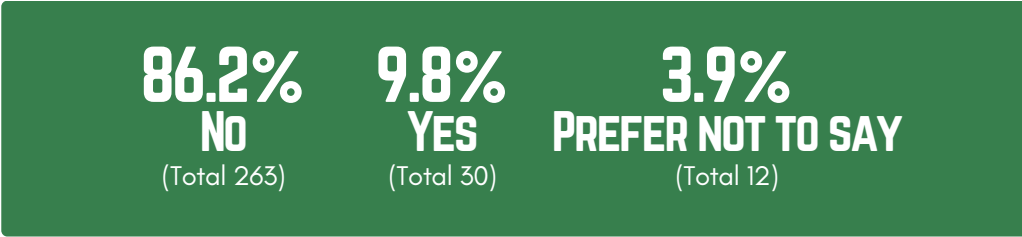


Key Barriers to Attendance

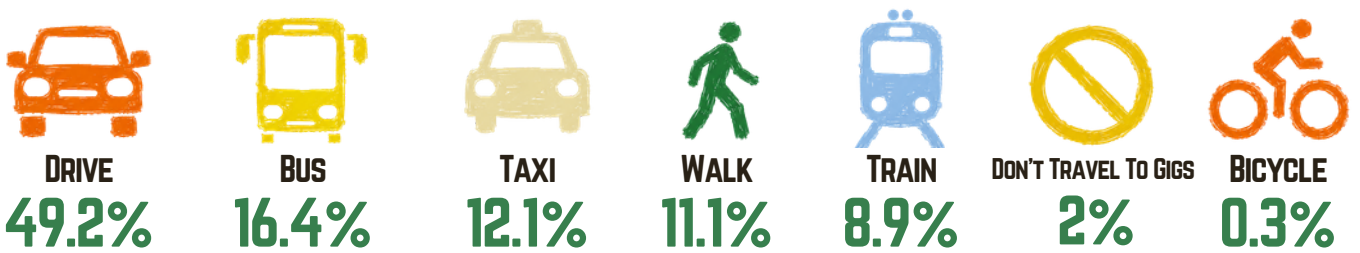
(Respondents could select multiple)



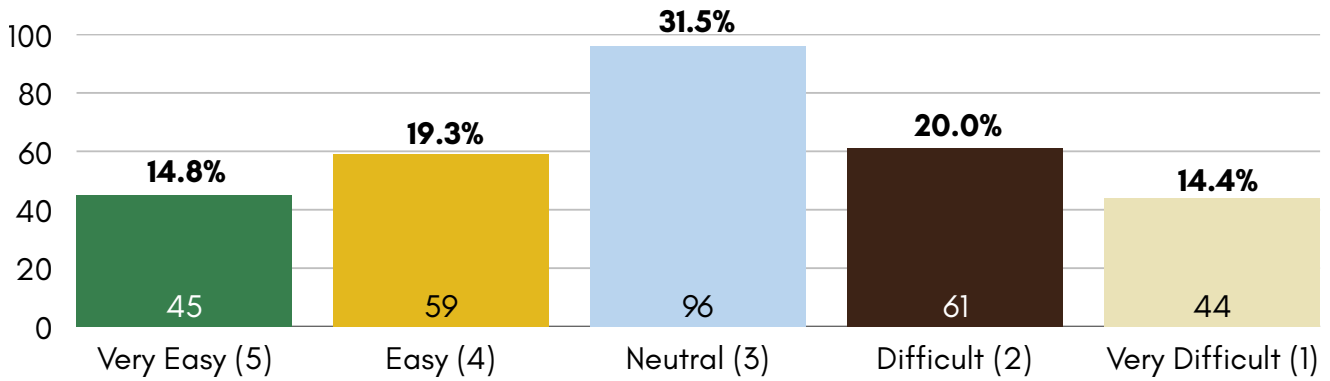
Disability & Access Needs



Travel to Live Music Events



Ease of Travel via Public Transport
(Scale of 1-5)

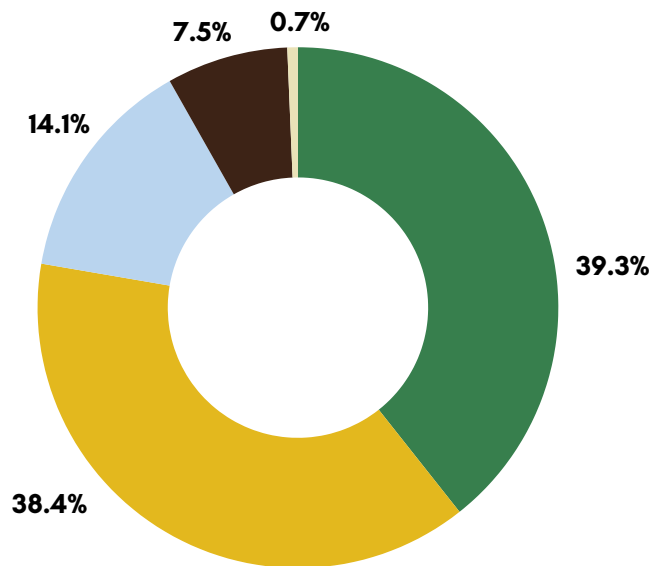


Genres People Want More Of
(Top Recurring Themes)

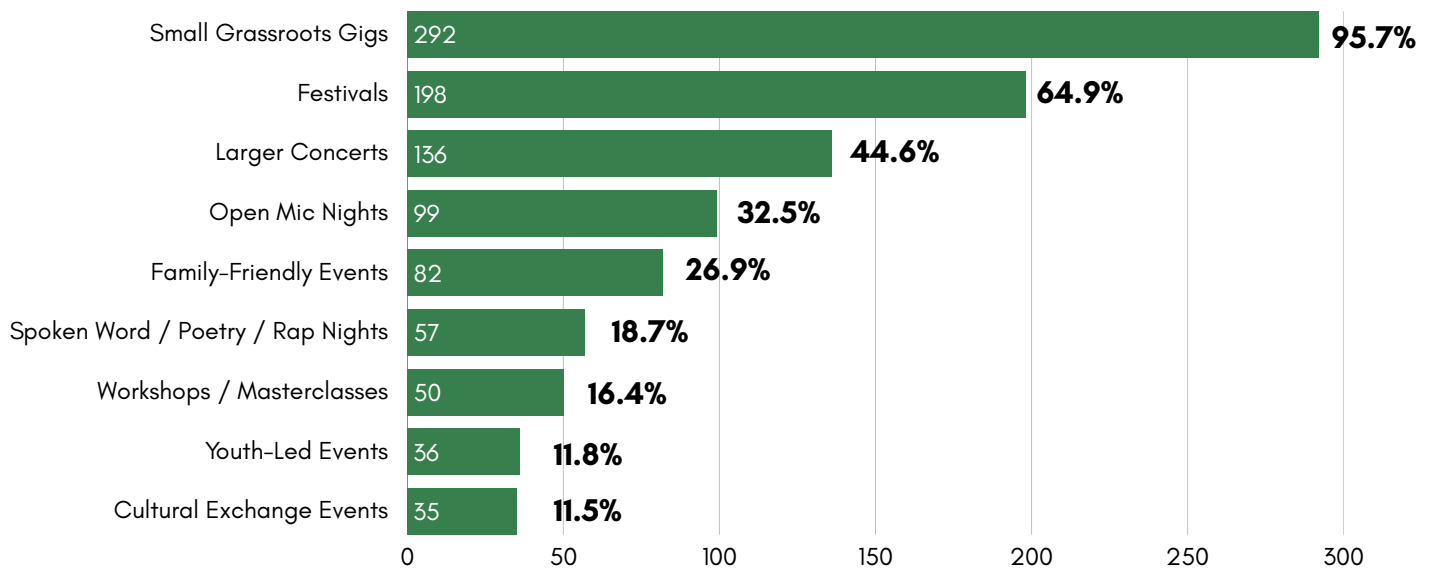


Typical Spend on a Grassroots Gig

- £16+ (Total 43)
- £11 - 15 (Total 120)
- £6 - 10 (Total 117)
- £1 - 5 (Total 23)
- Free (Total 2)



Types of Live Events People Want More Of (Respondents could select multiple)



Funding Awareness

Artists

Heard of Funding but Don't Understand It: Total 28
(54.9%)

Not Aware of Funding: Total 19
(37.3%)

Understand How to Apply: Total 4
(7.8%)

Venues / Promoters

Not Aware: Total 4
(66.7%)

Some Awareness: Total 2
(33.3%)

Education / Youth Sector

Not Aware: Total 6
(54.5%)

Heard of It but Not Confident Applying: Total 4
(36.4%)

Not Sure: Total 1
(9.1%)

SWOT ANALYSIS

Strengths

Strong Musical Heritage

Wigan has a rich musical legacy, from the Northern Soul movement at Wigan Casino to successful artists such as The Verve, Starsailor, The Lottery Winners and The Lathums. This heritage provides a strong cultural identity and demonstrates the borough's long-standing contribution to the UK music landscape.

Strong Community Ethos

Consultation feedback highlighted a supportive and collaborative culture among artists, venues and promoters. Many grassroots initiatives rely on strong relationships and a shared commitment to sustaining live music locally.

Active Grassroots Venues and Promoters

Independent venues and promoters continue to programme regular live music despite challenging conditions. Their work provides essential platforms for emerging artists and helps maintain a consistent local music offer.

Existing Venue Infrastructure

The borough already has a network of small and mid-sized venues supporting grassroots music activity. These spaces form the foundation of the local music ecosystem and provide opportunities for artists to perform and build audiences.

Music Education in Schools

Schools and education providers deliver strong music programmes, creating a pipeline of emerging talent. This educational foundation plays an important role in nurturing the next generation of musicians.

National Recognition Through Music Venue Trust

The Snug's inclusion in the Music Venue Properties initiative has brought national attention to Wigan's grassroots music scene. This recognition highlights the borough's relevance within wider national discussions about protecting grassroots music venues.

Innovative Local Initiatives

Projects such as The Early Doors Club demonstrate new approaches to programming that broaden audience participation. These initiatives show how creative solutions can address barriers such as late-night event culture.

Emerging Cultural Infrastructure Opportunities

Developments such as the regeneration of Haigh Hall and the reopening of venues like The Old Courts create opportunities for expanded programming. These projects could strengthen the borough's live music infrastructure in the coming years.

Strategic Location Within Greater Manchester

Wigan benefits from proximity to one of the UK's largest creative economies. This location provides opportunities for collaboration, regional partnerships and access to wider audiences.

Strong Local Identity and Pride

Consultation responses showed strong pride in Wigan's musical heritage and cultural identity. This sense of identity provides a strong foundation for building a confident and distinctive grassroots music scene.

Strong Visible Role Models and Success Stories

Wigan has produced nationally recognised artists including The Verve, Starsailor, The Lottery Winners and The Lathums. Their continued association with the borough provides visible progression pathways for emerging artists and reinforces confidence in Wigan's music identity.

Emerging Alternative Ownership Models

Wigan has become nationally recognised for innovative approaches to protecting grassroots music infrastructure through community and cultural ownership models. The acquisition of The Snug through Music Venue Properties demonstrates how alternative ownership approaches can strengthen long-term resilience within the grassroots sector.

Weaknesses

Lack of a Clear Artist Progression Ladder

Artists can perform in small venues locally but must often leave the borough to progress further. This gap limits opportunities for artists to build their careers while remaining rooted in Wigan.

Limited Mid-Sized Venue Capacity

There are few consistent opportunities for artists to perform in venues between small grassroots spaces and large event platforms. This makes it difficult for artists to develop audiences locally as they grow.

Shortage of Rehearsal and Creative Spaces

Artists reported limited access to rehearsal rooms, recording facilities and affordable creative infrastructure. This restricts opportunities for collaboration, experimentation and skill development

Low Awareness of Funding Opportunities

Survey results showed that many artists and educators are unaware of available funding schemes. As a result, potential investment opportunities for the borough's music sector are often missed.

Financial Fragility of Venues

Many grassroots venues operate on tight margins and rely heavily on bar revenue to remain viable. This financial pressure can limit their ability to take risks on emerging artists or experimental programming.

Limited Capacity for Sector Coordination

Much of the borough's music activity is delivered independently, with limited dedicated resource to coordinate partnerships, communication and long-term strategic development across the sector.

Fragmented Communication Across the Sector

Artists, venues and promoters often operate independently with limited coordination. This fragmentation can lead to missed opportunities for collaboration and shared promotion.

Limited Central Promotion of Gigs and Opportunities

Audiences and artists reported difficulty discovering local events and performance opportunities. The absence of a centralised platform reduces visibility for the borough's music activity.

Transport Challenges Across the Borough

Public transport limitations and reliance on cars can affect attendance at live events. These issues can be particularly challenging for people travelling from outer areas of the borough.

Accessibility Barriers

Accessibility across venues is inconsistent, creating barriers for some artists and audiences. Clearer information and improved infrastructure would help increase participation.

Limited Programming for Some Genres

Focus groups highlighted limited opportunities for genres such as electronic music. This restricts the diversity of the borough's music offer and the development of certain creative communities.

Limited Youth Representation Within Survey Responses

While wider consultation included engagement with young people, under-25 representation within survey responses was comparatively low, highlighting the need for continued targeted youth engagement.

Opportunities

Haigh Hall Regeneration

The redevelopment of Haigh Hall presents potential for large-scale live music and festival

programming. Alongside existing major venues such as Leigh Sports Village and The Brick Community Stadium, these venues could help establish a stronger flagship offer for live music across the borough.

Building a Clear Artist Progression Ladder

Connecting venues and events across the borough could create a structured pathway for artists to develop locally. A clear progression route would allow musicians to grow their careers without needing to leave Wigan.

Activation of Underused Civic and Heritage Spaces

The borough contains a range of underused civic, heritage and community buildings that could support expanded music activity through flexible cultural use. The Creative Industries Capital Asset Strategy has identified opportunities to repurpose these underused assets, creating a long-term blueprint for cultural and creative growth across the borough.

Growth of New and Revitalised Venues

New venues and renewed activity at existing spaces can expand performance opportunities. This growth could help strengthen the overall resilience of the local music ecosystem.

Access to National Funding Initiatives

Funding programmes linked to the Grassroots Music Levy and other national schemes could support venues and artists. Increased awareness and support for applications could unlock significant investment.

Greater Manchester Partnerships

Regional strategies for the creative economy offer opportunities for collaboration and investment. Aligning local initiatives with regional priorities could strengthen support for the borough's music sector.

Expansion of Innovative Event Formats

Alternative programming models such as early evening events can broaden participation. These approaches can help address transport and accessibility challenges.

Stronger Collaboration Across Venues and Promoters

Improved coordination could strengthen the overall music ecosystem. Shared communication platforms and networks could help venues and promoters work more strategically together.

National Policy Focus on Grassroots Music

Increased attention from policymakers and industry bodies creates opportunities for support and advocacy. Wigan has the opportunity to position itself as a borough actively supporting grassroots music.

Inclusive Programming Initiatives

Partnerships with organisations supporting access and inclusion can widen participation. These initiatives can ensure the music scene reflects the diversity of the borough's communities.

Leveraging Successful Local Artists

Nationally successful artists from Wigan can inspire emerging musicians and strengthen local identity. Their achievements help demonstrate the potential of the borough's music scene.

Threats

Financial Pressures on Venues

Rising operational costs continue to threaten the sustainability of grassroots venues. Without additional support, some venues may struggle to maintain regular programming.

Cost-of-Living Pressures on Audiences

Reduced disposable income may impact attendance at live music events. Lower audience spending can directly affect venue viability.

Competition From Nearby Major Cities

Manchester and Liverpool attract artists, promoters and audiences away from smaller towns. This makes it harder for local venues to compete for events and attention.

Competition for Tour Routing

Touring artists often prioritise larger cities, meaning towns like Wigan can be bypassed. This reflects a wider trend of touring circuits concentrating around major urban centres.

Loss of Cultural Infrastructure

Without long-term protection, grassroots venues remain vulnerable to closure. The loss of even a small number of spaces can significantly weaken the local music ecosystem.

Overreliance on a Small Number of Venues

A significant proportion of grassroots music activity is concentrated within a relatively small number of venues and organisations. The loss or reduction of activity within these spaces could have a disproportionate impact on the wider ecosystem.

Reliance on Volunteer-Led Activity

Much of the scene depends on a small number of individuals, creating risk of burnout. Without broader support structures, this model may become difficult to sustain.

Limited Awareness of Funding Opportunities

Low awareness could prevent the borough from accessing available funding. This would limit the resources available to support artists and venues.

Transport Limitations

Late-night public transport constraints may discourage attendance at events. These limitations can also affect artists travelling to perform.

Accessibility Barriers

Inconsistent accessibility standards may limit participation. Addressing these barriers is essential for creating a more inclusive music scene.

Changing Audience Behaviour

Post-pandemic shifts in audience habits continue to affect smaller venues. Many venues are still adapting to changing patterns in how audiences attend live events.

The themes identified within this SWOT analysis directly inform the structure and priorities of this strategy. The following chapters explore these findings in greater detail, examining progression and talent development, spaces and infrastructure, audiences and participation, and economic sustainability across Wigan Borough's grassroots music ecosystem.

CHAPTER 1: ACCESS, AUDIENCE & VISIBILITY

Overview

This chapter examines how audiences access and engage with live music across Wigan Borough.

The evidence highlights a consistent challenge: audiences are not being reached, supported or retained in a reliable way. Barriers to participation are shaped by a combination of factors, including visibility, transport, safety, affordability and changing patterns of behaviour.

Awareness of live music activity is fragmented, with no single, reliable source of information. Access is also uneven across the borough, influenced by geography, transport connectivity and practical considerations such as cost and travel time.

Audience confidence plays an important role. For some, particularly in the evening, concerns around safety and getting home affect decisions about whether to attend. At the same time, behaviour is shifting, with attendance increasingly driven by familiarity, and less by routine or spontaneous engagement.

This is reflected in the survey findings, where audiences identified a range of practical and structural barriers to attendance. The most commonly cited issues included events not being promoted well enough (24.3%), not knowing what was on locally (23.9%), travel and transport difficulties (22.3%), lack of local choice (19.3%) and cost (15.1%).

The evidence also indicates that traditional late-night, alcohol-led models do not meet the needs of all audiences. Early evening programming and more flexible formats were

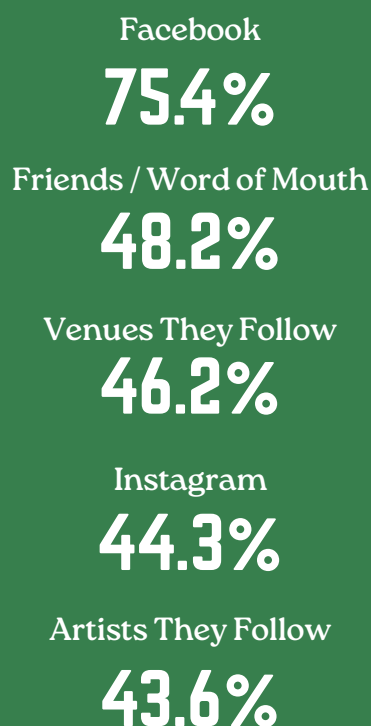
consistently identified as ways to widen participation.

Improving access therefore requires a broader approach. It is not only about the availability of venues, but about how audiences discover activity, how confident they feel attending, and how well events align with their lives.

Visibility & Discovery

Consultation and survey findings indicate that visibility of live music activity across the borough is fragmented. There is no centralised system through which audiences can easily discover what is happening, resulting in reliance on disconnected channels and informal networks.

Survey data shows that audiences primarily discover gigs through social media and personal networks:



While these channels are effective at an individual level, they do not operate as a cohesive system. Awareness is therefore uneven and often limited to audiences already connected to specific venues, artists or social circles.

This is reflected in qualitative feedback, particularly from younger audiences:

“We never really hear about gigs in Wigan.”

As a result, discovery is largely dependent on existing networks, which can reinforce the perception that there is limited activity, even where events are taking place.

Stakeholder feedback highlights the wider impact of this. Promoters and venue operators reported that events often rely on artists bringing their own audiences, rather than benefiting from a shared audience base. This creates a model where acts with an existing following are more likely to draw consistent crowds, making it harder to build audiences for grassroots and emerging talent.

As one promoter described:

“People come if they know the band... if not, it’s a harder sell.”

This suggests that attendance is being driven more by familiarity than by discovery.

Stakeholder discussions indicate that this is not simply a marketing issue at event level, but a structural challenge across the sector. Activity is often delivered in isolation rather than as part of a connected system:

“There are loads of people involved in grassroots music... but everyone’s doing it in their own little pockets.”

This limits opportunities for cross-promotion and shared audience development, leaving visibility dependent on individual effort rather than collective infrastructure. In some cases, competitive pressures further reinforce this dynamic:

“It’s a really competitive sector... and I think sometimes that comes to the detriment of actual progress for the scene.”

Artists also identified visibility as a barrier to progression. Survey responses show that 35.3% of artists believe that additional promotion and marketing support would help them develop their careers.

Overall, visibility is not currently functioning as a coordinated system across the borough. It remains fragmented and inconsistent, limiting audience awareness, constraining artist development and reducing the overall impact of live music activity.

Recommendations

1.

Develop a Centralised “What’s On” Platform

Establish a borough-wide listings platform to improve visibility of live music activity, making it easier for audiences to discover events across multiple venues and promoters.

1.2

Strengthen Cross-Venue Promotion and Collaboration

Support coordinated marketing approaches and campaigns between venues, promoters and artists to build shared audiences and reduce reliance on individual fanbases.

1.3

Provide Targeted Marketing Support for Grassroots Artists and Promoters

Introduce accessible support, training or funding to improve promotion and audience development, addressing the 35.3% of artists who identify marketing support as key to progression.

Transport, Geography & Access to Activity

Transport and geography play a significant role in shaping access to live music across the borough. Evidence indicates that access varies depending on location, time of day and available travel options.

Survey data reflects a mixed picture:

- 34.1% of respondents rated travelling to gigs by public transport as easy or very easy
- 31.5% gave a neutral rating
- 34.4% rated it difficult or very difficult

This suggests that public transport does not function as a consistent enabler of access, with travel remaining a point of friction for a significant proportion of audiences.

Patterns of transport use reinforce this. There is a strong reliance on private vehicles:

- 49.2% of respondents travel to gigs by car
- 25.2% use public transport
 - Bus: 16.4%
 - Train: 8.9%

This level of car dependency has wider implications, influencing how long people stay at events and limiting participation where return travel is uncertain.

This sits alongside wider improvements to public transport connectivity across Greater Manchester through initiatives such as the Bee Network, which has received regional and national recognition for its more integrated, resident-focused approach to transport. These developments demonstrate the potential benefits of better connectivity and accessibility across the city-region. However, consultation findings suggest that practical barriers around late-night travel, affordability and cross-borough access continue to shape how audiences engage with live music locally, particularly at grassroots level.

Qualitative feedback highlights that these challenges are not experienced equally. Participants referenced differences between

townships, with those outside central areas facing greater barriers due to limited connectivity and fewer direct routes.

Young people in particular identified transport as a key constraint. Focus group feedback highlighted the cost of taxis, lack of late-night services and limited independence when travelling between areas:

“If I went to a gig in Wigan and it finished at 12, I’ve got to get an Uber back... which would cost me at least £20.”

These factors reduce the likelihood of attending events, particularly beyond immediate local areas.

Stakeholders also noted that audiences are often more willing to travel to nearby cities such as Manchester, where transport is perceived as more reliable and activity more concentrated:

“With Manchester, there’s 24-hour buses... you can still get home.”

This creates a competitive dynamic, where local provision is influenced not only by programming, but by ease of access.

For some audiences, barriers extend beyond transport alone. Participation is shaped by a combination of travel, cost and personal circumstances, including caring responsibilities:

“Anything that’s outside of your immediate vicinity is a really big ask.”

This reinforces that access is not just about distance, but about how realistic attending an event feels within people’s day-to-day lives.

Alternative delivery models demonstrate how some of these barriers can be reduced. Activity delivered within local neighbourhoods and non-traditional spaces was identified as effective in engaging audiences who are less likely to travel.

Overall, transport and geography create uneven access across the borough, shaping attendance patterns and limiting participation for certain groups.

Recommendations

1.4

Align Programming With Transport Realities

Encourage event timings, particularly earlier start and finish times, that better align with public transport availability and reduce reliance on late-night travel.

1.5

Improve Connectivity and Access to Venues

Work with local partners to explore improvements to evening transport provision, including late-night services and clearer routes between venues and transport hubs.

1.6

Expand Hyper-Local and Distributed Delivery Models

Support the delivery of live music activity across multiple neighbourhoods and non-traditional spaces, reducing the need for cross-borough travel and improving access for underrepresented communities.

Safety, Confidence & the Wider Environment

Feeling safe when attending live music events is an important factor shaping participation across the borough. While many audiences report feeling safe, confidence is not consistent across all groups.

Survey data shows:

- 75.4% of respondents reported that they feel safe
- 12.5% reported that they sometimes feel safe
- 12.1% reported that they do not feel safe

There are clear differences between groups. Female respondents were 29.4% more likely than male respondents to express concerns about attending gigs at night. This rises further to 36.8% among

respondents who identified as artists.

This highlights that safety is a more significant consideration for some audiences, particularly when travelling to and from events in the evening.

Stakeholder feedback highlighted concerns around audience confidence in the town centre later at night, particularly among women, older audiences and those less comfortable navigating the night-time environment.

Survey responses also show that safety influences behaviour:

- 11.1% of respondents said safety and security affect their choice of event or venue
- 12.1% said safety concerns stop them from attending more local gigs

Feedback points to a mix of contributing factors, including poorly lit areas, limited late-night transport and discomfort when moving between venues and transport routes. These issues are more pronounced later in the evening.

The wider environment also plays a role. Stakeholders noted that where there is less

activity in town centres, confidence tends to drop.

As one venue operator described:

“One of the reasons people don’t come into town anymore is because they don’t feel safe.”

At the same time, busier environments tend to feel safer. Where there is more visible activity and footfall, audiences are generally more comfortable attending events.

As Jonathan Davenport also noted:

“What makes venues safer, the town centre safer, is when there’s punters who are enjoying themselves en masse out and about.”

Overall, safety should be understood as part of a wider environment shaped by activity, visibility and connectivity. Where audiences do not feel confident attending events, participation is reduced, limiting both audience growth and the wider vitality of the live music sector.

Recommendations

1.7

Support Safe and Active Night-Time Environments

Work with partners and providers to support safe, visible and well-managed live music environments through coordinated programming, stewarding, lighting, wayfinding and improved routes between venues and transport hubs. This should build upon Wigan’s existing Purple Flag status and support the continued development and expansion of safe and welcoming town centre activity at night.

1.8

Align Programming With Safer and More Accessible Timeframes

Encourage a mix of early evening and late-night events to provide safer, more accessible options for different audiences, particularly those affected by safety concerns.

Audience Behaviour & Cultural Shift

Engagement with live music across the borough is shifting, with clear implications for how events are programmed, promoted and sustained.

Stakeholder feedback points to a move away from regular gig-going. Attendance is becoming more selective, with audiences more likely to attend events featuring artists they already know, rather than taking a chance on something new.

This is reflected in survey data. When asked what influences their choice of event, 81.6% of respondents selected lineup or artists, making it the most significant factor, ahead of atmosphere (66.6%), location (67.2%) and ticket price (57.7%).

This suggests that decisions are now largely driven by who is performing, rather than by routine engagement with live music.

Promoters and venue operators see this shift clearly. Events are increasingly reliant on recognisable acts or artists with an existing following to generate attendance, which makes it harder to build audiences for emerging or lesser-known artists.

As one venue operator described:

“The tribute side is more of a safer bet... when it’s a band people haven’t heard of, they see it as a bit of a risk.”

There are also ongoing challenges in building consistent audiences over time. As one venue noted:

“We struggle to get people in week in, week out.”

This reflects a level of demand that is not yet strong enough to support regular programming at scale, particularly in mid-sized venues.

Feedback from younger audiences reinforces this pattern. Focus groups highlighted low awareness of local activity and a tendency to attend events in nearby cities such as Manchester, where there is greater visibility and choice:

“There’s nothing going on.”

This perception persists despite activity taking place locally, pointing to a gap between provision and awareness.

Audience behaviour is also becoming more reactive. Promoters reported more last-minute decision

making and delayed ticket purchases, reducing advance commitment and increasing uncertainty around attendance.

At the same time, expectations are evolving. Younger audiences in particular emphasised the importance of atmosphere, energy and the overall experience, with a preference for more engaging and high-energy formats.

Overall, engagement is becoming more selective and less routine. Attendance is shaped by familiarity, perceived value and confidence, rather than habit, creating a more uncertain environment for venues and promoters and limiting opportunities for grassroots artists.

Recommendations

1.9

Support Audience Development and More Balanced Programming

Encourage approaches that build trust in venues and promoters, not just individual artists, while supporting venues to programme a stronger mix of emerging, original and commercially viable acts.

1.10

Reduce Risk For Audiences Engaging With New Artists

Support low-cost, low-barrier entry points, including mixed bills, showcases and flexible ticketing, to make discovery-led attendance more appealing.

1.12

Rebuild a Culture of Regular Live Music Attendance

Support campaigns and initiatives that position live music as a regular social activity, helping to re-establish habitual engagement and reduce reliance on one-off, event-led attendance.

CASE STUDY: THE EARLY DOORS CLUB

Reimagining Access to Live Music

The Early Doors Club is a grassroots initiative designed to reimagine how live music events are programmed and experienced within Wigan's cultural landscape. Established in 2023, the project emerged as a response to several access challenges identified within the borough's music ecosystem, including late-night event culture, a dwindling early-nighttime economy across the borough, transport limitations and barriers to participation for younger audiences and families. The project aims to bring high-quality live music directly to people's doorsteps across the borough, ensuring that access to cultural activity is not limited to city centre venues or traditional late-night formats.

Since its launch, The Early Doors Club has delivered over 150 events and welcomed more than 11,000 attendees, demonstrating strong demand for alternative live music formats. The project began in Wigan, hosting events across multiple venues and neighbourhoods in the borough, and has since grown into a recognised model for inclusive grassroots programming. Its success locally has led to expansion into Bolton, with further growth planned across Greater Manchester in the coming years.

The model centres on early evening live music events, typically starting and finishing earlier than traditional gig formats. By bringing performance times forward, the initiative allows audiences to attend live music while still aligning with public transport schedules and accommodating those who cannot participate

in late-night events. This approach has proven particularly effective at attracting audiences who might otherwise feel excluded from traditional gig settings, including younger attendees, families and individuals balancing work or childcare commitments.

In addition to expanding audience accessibility, The Early Doors Club provides valuable early-stage performance opportunities for emerging artists. By creating a welcoming and lower-pressure environment for both performers and audiences, the events help build confidence among developing musicians while strengthening connections within the local scene. The format encourages community participation and supports informal networking between artists, promoters and audiences.

Importantly, the initiative demonstrates how format innovation can address structural barriers without requiring significant new infrastructure investment. Rather than relying solely on new venues or large-scale funding interventions, The Early Doors Club shows how programming adjustments can broaden participation and strengthen grassroots activity within existing spaces.

The project also reflects the collaborative spirit identified throughout the consultation process. Events are delivered through partnerships between venues, promoters and local creatives, highlighting the importance of community-led initiatives in sustaining the borough's cultural activity.

Within the context of this strategy, The Early Doors Club represents an example of practical experimentation within the grassroots sector. By challenging traditional gig timings and creating more inclusive event formats, the initiative offers a replicable model that could support audience development and cultural participation across Wigan and the wider Greater Manchester region.

Inclusion, Affordability & Alternative Models

Access to live music across the borough is shaped not just by transport or visibility, but by how well events fit around people's lives. Evidence suggests that traditional late-night, venue-based models do not work for all audiences.

Survey data highlights the role of practical factors. When asked what influences their decision to attend events:

- 36.1% selected start and finish times
- 11.1% selected safety and security
- 5.9% selected accessible facilities

When asked what prevents them from attending more grassroots live music locally:

- 12.1% cited safety concerns
- 11.5% cited childcare or family responsibilities
- 2.6% said their accessibility needs are not met

These responses point to a range of barriers linked to time, cost and individual circumstances.

Timing is a key factor. Late-night events were consistently identified as limiting participation

for families, older audiences and those with caring responsibilities, as well as those affected by transport and safety concerns.

Feedback from ICan artists reflects this:

“Everything has to be arranged around care... it’s not just turning up.”

Affordability also shapes access. The combined cost of tickets, travel and spending on the night was identified as a barrier, particularly for younger audiences and those on lower incomes. This suggests that the overall cost of attending, not just ticket price, influences participation.

Location and lifestyle also play a role. Audiences are less likely to attend events that require travel beyond their immediate area, particularly where time, cost or personal circumstances make this less practical.

Alternative models show how some of these barriers can be reduced. Consultation and project evaluation also highlighted the importance of representation within programming itself. Feedback from The Snug's diversification activity delivered through Arts Council-supported programmes demonstrated that audiences were more likely to engage when they saw a wider range of genres, identities, backgrounds and lived experiences reflected within local programming. This suggests that inclusion is shaped not only by access and affordability, but also by how relevant and representative live music activity feels to different communities across the borough. The Early Doors Club was consistently identified as a positive example, with its early evening format making events easier to attend by aligning with transport, safety and caring responsibilities. Its flexible ticketing approach

also supports affordability.

The Snug provides a further example of how environment can shape access. Its smaller scale and more informal setting were identified as helping people feel more comfortable attending, particularly those who may be new to live music or attending alone.

Non-traditional spaces, including cafes and community venues, were also highlighted as effective entry points. These settings can feel more accessible and less formal, helping to bring in audiences who may not engage with traditional venues. This was reinforced through survey responses, where participants repeatedly identified spaces such as cafes, churches, libraries and community buildings as places they would feel comfortable attending live music activity.

Cross-sector collaboration also emerged as a

positive way of widening participation and creating more accessible opportunities for young people. Programmes such as the Song for Leigh project, delivered in partnership with local artists, schools and community organisations, demonstrate how creative activity outside traditional venue settings can support engagement, mentoring and skills development. By providing structured opportunities for young people to collaborate with professional artists at weekends and outside formal education settings, these approaches help strengthen connections between grassroots music, education and community participation.

Overall, access is shaped as much by lifestyle and circumstance as it is by infrastructure. Expanding the range of formats, timings and settings in which live music takes place will be key to reaching a broader and more inclusive audience.

CASE STUDY: ICAN GROUP

Advocating for Inclusive Participation in Wigan's Music Scene

ICan Group is a relatively new organisation working across Wigan and Leigh to support disabled artists and audiences within the local cultural sector. Founded by disabled performance poet Natasha Tingle in collaboration with The Old Courts, the organisation was created to bring together access voices across different art forms and help strengthen inclusion within the borough's grassroots creative ecosystem.

The organisation focuses on advocacy, peer support, artist development and improving visibility around access needs within live music and cultural spaces. Its work aims to create a more connected and supportive environment for people who may otherwise face barriers to participation, whether as performers, creatives or audiences.

Although still in its early stages, ICan is already supporting a growing network of around 40 to 50 individuals, including musicians, performers and audience members engaging with grassroots music activity across the borough. This includes artists at different stages of development, from those beginning to engage with local opportunities through to individuals already performing and working professionally within the sector.

Alongside creating social and creative opportunities, the organisation also works to connect individuals with venues, promoters and cultural organisations, helping improve confidence and participation within the local scene. Through discussion groups, networking activity and advocacy work, ICan is helping to create stronger communication between artists, audiences and cultural spaces across Wigan Borough.

The organisation's work also demonstrates the importance of partnership working within the grassroots music sector. Through collaboration with organisations such as The Old Courts and wider local creative networks, ICan is helping to strengthen links between access advocacy, artist development and live music participation. This collaborative approach reflects the wider need for a more connected and inclusive cultural ecosystem across the borough.

A key aspect of ICan's work is its focus on visibility and confidence. By creating spaces where individuals feel represented, supported and able to engage openly with access needs, the organisation is helping broaden participation within grassroots music and cultural activity. Its work highlights that inclusion is not only about physical infrastructure, but also about communication, awareness, environment and ongoing support.

Within the context of this strategy, ICan Group represents an important example of how community-led organisations can help widen participation, strengthen inclusion and support a more accessible grassroots music ecosystem. Its development also demonstrates the wider value of supporting grassroots organisations that create pathways into cultural participation for groups who may otherwise remain underrepresented within the local music scene.

Recommendations

1.12

Expand Inclusive Formats and Alternative Delivery Models

Support a wider range of event formats, including early evening programming, non-alcohol-led events and activity in community and non-traditional spaces, to better reflect different lifestyles and needs.

1.13

Embed Inclusion Within Event Design and Delivery

Support venues and organisers to consider access, timing and audience needs from the outset, ensuring events are designed to be inclusive rather than adapted on a case-by-case basis.

WHAT WORKS

(Case Studies & Positive Models)

While the evidence highlights a range of barriers to access and participation, it also points to clear examples of what is working across the borough. These approaches show that when barriers are reduced, audiences do engage.

The Early Doors Club was consistently identified as a strong example of accessible programming. Its early evening format responds directly to many of the challenges outlined in this chapter, particularly around transport, safety and caring responsibilities. By aligning with these factors and offering flexible ticketing, it makes live music more accessible to a wider range of audiences. Feedback also suggests that in this setting, audiences are more open to discovering new artists.

The Snug provides a further example of how environment and approach can influence participation. As a small, community-led venue, it has built a consistent audience by creating a welcoming and informal setting. This has helped attract a mix of audiences, including younger attendees, people attending alone and those new to live music.

TyldesleyFest demonstrates the value of coordination at a local level. By bringing together multiple venues and organisers, it creates a more visible and connected offer, encouraging audiences to engage with a wider range of activities across a concentrated area.

Larger-scale events at Haigh Hall highlight a different aspect of audience engagement.

These events show that there is strong demand for live music when it is clearly positioned and visible. They are particularly effective at attracting audiences who may not regularly attend smaller-scale events.

The Lottery Winners' headline show at Leigh Sports Village highlights the role civic infrastructure can play in supporting major cultural activity within the borough. Co-owned by Wigan Council, the stadium demonstrates how civic assets can help support artists as they progress from grassroots venues to large-scale hometown performances. Having developed through local pubs and venues across Wigan Borough, the band's return to headline their biggest hometown show reflects the long-term potential of local artist development when supported by connected infrastructure and partnership working.

The project also extended beyond the concert itself. In collaboration with Leigh-based Northern Heart Films, the band produced a feature-length documentary funded by Wigan Council through reinvested BBC filming fees, creating training, work experience and paid creative opportunities for 22 young people from the local area.

Community-led and outreach activity also plays an important role. Events delivered in neighbourhoods and non-traditional spaces were identified as effective in reaching audiences who are less likely to attend venue-based activity, particularly where travel, cost or confidence are barriers.

Overall, these examples show that the key barriers identified in this chapter are not fixed. When issues around timing, cost, visibility and environment are addressed, audiences respond. This provides a clear direction for how access and participation can be strengthened across the borough.

Strategic Direction

Wigan's challenge is not a lack of appetite for live music, but inconsistent connection between audiences and the activity already taking place across the borough.

Across Wigan, venues, promoters and cultural organisations are delivering activities that audiences value. However, barriers linked to visibility, transport, affordability, safety and audience confidence continue to shape how people discover and engage with grassroots live music.

The opportunity is to build a more visible, accessible and connected live music offer. This includes improving how audiences discover events, supporting more inclusive and locally rooted delivery models, and strengthening relationships between artists, venues and communities.

Evidence throughout this chapter suggests that audiences do engage when activity feels accessible, welcoming and relevant to people's everyday lives. By reducing barriers to participation and strengthening audience connection across the sector, Wigan can support more consistent engagement with grassroots live music, broaden participation across the borough, and build stronger long-term relationships between audiences, artists and local venues.

CASE STUDY: SONG FOR LEIGH

Creative Participation and Local Identity

"Song for Leigh" is a collaborative music project delivered by Spirix and Down To Earth, working in partnership with The Lottery Winners, designed to engage emerging musicians and songwriters in the creation of an original piece of music representing the town of Leigh. The project brings together local participants with established artists and industry professionals, providing a structured opportunity to experience the full creative process, from initial idea through to a finished song.

At its core, the initiative focuses on bridging the gap between participation and real-world creative development. Participants are not only encouraged to contribute ideas, but are actively involved in shaping lyrics, melodies and direction, working alongside experienced practitioners in a professional environment. This approach provides insight into how music is developed in practice, offering a level of industry exposure that is not typically accessible through formal education alone.

A key feature of the project is its emphasis on accessibility. By offering paid participation, the initiative removes a significant barrier for many young people, particularly those balancing work or other commitments. This enables a broader range of individuals to engage with the project and ensures that creative opportunities are not limited to those with the financial flexibility to participate unpaid.

The involvement of The Lottery Winners as mentors and collaborators plays an important role in the project's impact. As artists with strong local roots who have achieved national success, their presence provides visible and relatable role models for participants. This connection reinforces the idea that creative careers are achievable while maintaining a link to place, helping to build confidence and ambition among those involved.

The project also demonstrates clear benefits in terms of personal development. Participants gain confidence in sharing ideas, contributing creatively within a group setting and engaging with professional processes. The experience of seeing a piece of work develop from concept to completion provides a tangible sense of achievement and a clearer understanding of how to progress within the music industry.

Beyond individual outcomes, "Song for Leigh" contributes to a wider sense of local identity and cultural pride. By centring the project around the creation of a song for the town, it encourages participants to reflect on their connection to place and to contribute to a shared cultural narrative. This is further reinforced through the planned performance of the track at a major local event, creating a direct link between grassroots participation and a large-scale public platform.

The project highlights the value of structured, supported creative opportunities in developing both skills and confidence. At the same time, it reinforces the need for these experiences to connect into wider progression pathways, ensuring that participation can lead to sustained development rather than remaining as a one-off intervention.

As a model, "Song for Leigh" demonstrates how locally rooted, collaborative projects can combine artist development, accessibility and community identity. Its approach offers a scalable framework that could be applied more widely, supporting both individual progression and the broader strengthening of the local music ecosystem.

CASE STUDY: THE MONACO

Bridging the Mid-Sized Venue Gap

The Monaco Ballroom, a 700-capacity venue in Hindley, Wigan, represents one of the most significant infrastructure opportunities within the borough's grassroots music ecosystem. Historically known as a ballroom and later associated primarily with commercial programming such as Bongo's Bingo, the venue is now under new ownership and entering a period of transition.

John Norcott, who took ownership of the business in January 2026 after managing the venue for seven years, has expressed a clear ambition to reposition The Monaco as a broader creative hub. While the venue has previously hosted original acts, including multiple sold-out performances by The Lathums, its programming has largely been shaped by commercial risk mitigation. As a 700-capacity space, the financial realities are considerable: operating costs increase significantly when the venue opens, with security, staffing and bar service requirements creating high break-even thresholds. As Norcott notes, “It costs very little to not open the building. It costs a lot to open it.”

This scale presents both challenge and opportunity. Consultation findings across the borough identified a clear gap between smaller grassroots venues and large city-centre stages. The Monaco’s capacity positions it as a potential bridge within that “development ladder,” providing a crucial step-up stage for artists who have outgrown small rooms but are not yet touring nationally at scale. However, programming emerging original music at this size carries financial risk without audience guarantees.

Audience segmentation also presents a structural challenge. The Monaco’s current reputation as a commercial entertainment venue means original music audiences do not automatically associate the space with grassroots programming. Events featuring original artists have drawn distinct audiences from tribute or bingo nights, suggesting that identity repositioning and sustained programming consistency would be required to shift perception.

Despite these challenges, the venue demonstrates strong alignment with the strategic ambitions of this music plan. Norcott has expressed full support for borough-wide collaboration, including participation in a venue cohort and the development of regular networking events for artists, agents and promoters. He has also indicated willingness to engage with education providers such as TMP College and explore programming formats such as battle-of-the-bands events, showcase nights and genre-led programming blocks.

Crucially, The Monaco has not previously accessed Arts Council or sector-specific funding, largely due to previous ownership priorities. As a newly independent operator within an Arts Council Priority Place, the venue represents a strong candidate for risk-mitigation funding and infrastructure investment. Potential areas for support include original music programming subsidies, backline and PA upgrades, and pilot projects designed to build sustainable audience followings.

The Monaco therefore sits at a pivotal point: structurally capable of addressing the borough’s mid-sized venue gap, commercially cautious due to scale, but strategically open to collaboration, funding and repositioning. With targeted support and coordinated planning, it has the potential to become a cornerstone of Wigan’s progression pathway, enabling artists to develop locally rather than stepping immediately outside the borough to access larger stages.

CHAPTER 2: SKILLS, TALENT & PROGRESSION

Overview

Wigan has a strong foundation for music development, with active education provision, grassroots venues and a clear appetite for live performance. Across the borough, there is clear evidence of participation and ambition, with artists, audiences and organisations contributing to a growing local music culture.

Music education remains a significant strength within the borough. Schools, Wigan Music Service, Wigan & Leigh College, Winstanley College, and TMP College all play an important role in developing musical skills, building confidence and creating early opportunities for participation. Alongside formal education, wider youth and community provision also contributes to early engagement, helping young people access music activity from an early stage.

Stakeholder engagement also highlighted the important role education providers play in connecting young people to the wider music ecosystem through mentoring, careers guidance, industry engagement and live performance opportunities. However, consultation identified ongoing challenges around progression beyond education, particularly in helping young people navigate opportunities independently once formal support structures end. Educators also highlighted difficulties in identifying and communicating external opportunities outside the immediate scope of schools and colleges, reflecting a wider lack of joined-up infrastructure across the local music ecosystem.

Grassroots venues and community-led initiatives provide further opportunities for artists to develop beyond education settings. Spaces such as The Snug, Boulevard & The Old Courts were all referenced as supporting early-stage performances, while projects such as The Early Doors Club have demonstrated how alternative formats can broaden access and engage new audiences.

These examples show that multiple entry points into music activity already exist within the borough, supported by both community-led initiatives and formal education.

Alongside this, there are emerging opportunities to strengthen the wider ecosystem. Developments involving Haigh Hall, Robin Park Arena, Leigh Sports Village and Stacks Wigan present the potential for more regular large-scale music activity within the borough, helping to create a more complete progression route from grassroots venues through to higher-capacity stages.

However, across consultation, stakeholder engagement, focus groups and survey responses, a consistent challenge emerges: there is no clear, connected progression pathway linking these entry points into a coherent system.

Skills are being developed locally, but progression into sustained performance and career development is not consistently supported. Pathways exist, but they are fragmented and often informal, meaning artists frequently rely on personal networks and self-navigation to move forward.

This creates a system where talent is nurtured within Wigan but not always retained or developed locally.

CASE STUDY: HAIGH HALL REGENERATION

& Music-Led Place Development

Haigh Hall has long been one of Wigan Borough's most significant civic and cultural landmarks. Originally built in the 19th century and set within extensive parkland overlooking Wigan, the Hall has historically acted as a focal point for public life, leisure and large-scale community activity. Alongside its architectural and historical importance, the wider Haigh site has also played a role within the borough's cultural and musical identity over several decades.

Historically, the Hall and surrounding grounds have hosted live music activity ranging from community events through to larger-scale concerts and festivals. The site is also closely connected to Wigan's wider musical identity, with the surrounding area frequently referenced within local music history and cultural memory.

Current regeneration plans present a significant opportunity to re-establish Haigh Hall as a major cultural destination within Wigan Borough. Stakeholder discussions highlighted that music forms a central part of the Hall's long-term commercial and cultural strategy, with ambitions including regular music programming, grassroots activity and the long-term development of larger-scale events across the wider estate.

The regeneration highlights the potential role of civic infrastructure within the wider music ecosystem. Alongside grassroots venues and independent promoters, spaces such as Haigh Hall can help strengthen the borough's progression pathway by introducing larger-scale performance opportunities within Wigan itself.

Stakeholder discussions also highlighted the importance of balancing commercial ambition with grassroots development. The long-term vision includes creating opportunities for local artists to perform alongside larger acts, helping to strengthen local progression routes while increasing the visibility of Wigan's music scene within the wider region.

Importantly, the ambition extends beyond standalone events. Discussions emphasised embedding music within the future identity of the site, positioning Haigh Hall not only as a visitor destination, but as part of the borough's wider cultural infrastructure.

This aligns with wider themes emerging throughout the Music Plan, particularly around progression, regional positioning and talent retention. The development of a stronger programme of music activity at Haigh Hall has the potential to support audience growth, increase cultural visibility and strengthen Wigan's position within the wider Greater Manchester music landscape.

As one stakeholder described, success would mean "supporting and developing local artists, and helping to put Wigan back on the map for music."

THE PROGRESSION FRAMEWORK

Early Stage

Early-stage engagement with music in Wigan is strong. Across schools, colleges and community provision, there is clear evidence of young people actively participating in music education and creative activity. These settings provide a solid foundation for skill development, while grassroots initiatives and community-led spaces offer accessible entry points into performance.

However, there is a clear disconnect between this early engagement and progression into the local live music ecosystem.

“It’s all centred around college – once you’re outside of that, you don’t really know where to go.”

Participants consistently described limited awareness of local gigs, rehearsal spaces and opportunities beyond education settings. This creates a barrier at a critical stage of development, where individuals are motivated to progress but are unsure how to take the next step.

Consultation with local education providers reinforced concerns around the transition between education and the wider grassroots music sector. While students often access strong support, mentoring and performance opportunities during college, stakeholders highlighted a significant drop-off once learners leave formal education environments.

TMP College described how many emerging artists struggle to navigate the local music sector independently after graduation,

particularly those lacking confidence, industry contacts or experience networking within professional environments. Opportunities often rely on informal relationships, direct approaches to promoters or existing networks, rather than clear and visible progression routes.

Stakeholders noted that this particularly affects learners who may require additional support or structured guidance, creating a system where progression is often shaped by confidence and personal connections rather than talent or potential alone.

“The people who are really talented and capable... if they’re not the kind of person who’s confident enough to go out and network or approach venues and promoters themselves, they just disappear.”

This reflects a wider disconnect between education settings and the borough’s live music and cultural infrastructure. While skills are being developed, they are not consistently linked to venues, promoters or real-world opportunities, limiting progression beyond the classroom. At the same time, examples such as The Lottery Winners’ involvement in National Careers Week 2026, where the band visited five schools across Leigh and Tyldesley and spoke to more than 700 students about careers in music and the wider creative industries, demonstrate the value of stronger links between local artists, education and industry pathways.

Survey findings reinforce this:

- Only 9.8% feel very connected to other musicians
- 88.2% feel somewhat or not connected
- 49% say networking opportunities would help progression

Stakeholder engagement also highlighted the need for greater awareness of the wider range of careers connected to the music industry. Education providers noted that many young people still associate music solely with performing, despite the sector supporting a broad range of technical, creative and professional roles across areas such as production, live sound, management, marketing, touring, event delivery and content creation.

Education providers highlighted that increasing visibility of these pathways could help broaden participation and improve retention within the local creative economy, particularly for young people who may wish to work within music but do not necessarily see themselves as performers or artists.

This suggests that strengthening grassroots music infrastructure also requires stronger integration between education, industry and careers guidance, helping young people better understand the full range of opportunities available within the wider music ecosystem.

Community-level insight reinforces both strengths and gaps. Spaces such as The Snug demonstrate the value of accessible, grassroots environments in supporting early-stage development, while other programmes highlight a lack of continuity beyond initial engagement.

Overall, entry points into music exist, but they are not consistently connected, meaning progression often depends on individual navigation rather than a clear and supported pathway.

Recommendations

2.1

Establish a Clear Progression and Transition Framework

Develop clearer local pathways connecting education, grassroots venues, promoters and creative organisations, supporting artists as they move from education into sustained professional and grassroots activity.

2.2

Strengthen Links Between Education, Live Music & Creative Careers

Connect schools and colleges with venues to create real-world progression routes.

CASE STUDY: THE LOTTERY WINNERS (KATE LLOYD)

From Local Roots to National Success

Kate Lloyd, bassist of The Lottery Winners, offers a clear example of how artists have developed from Wigan's grassroots music scene to achieve national success. The band have progressed from local pub and venue performances to chart success, major festival appearances and international touring, establishing themselves as one of the most recognisable contemporary acts to emerge from the borough.

In the band's early years, their development was rooted in regular performances across local pubs, small venues and open mic nights in Wigan and Leigh. These spaces provided opportunities to experiment with new material, build confidence and learn how to perform in front of a range of audiences. The ability to play frequently at a local level allowed the band to establish a following and develop their identity as a live act.

At this stage, the local scene played an important role in shaping their progression. A mix of informal performance opportunities and grassroots venues created an environment where emerging bands could gain experience and begin building momentum. Moving from pubs into more established venues marked a step forward, offering access to more engaged audiences and a stronger sense of live music culture.

However, as the band developed, limitations within the local ecosystem became more apparent. While early-stage opportunities were

available, there were fewer options for progressing into larger venues within the borough. As a result, expanding into nearby cities, particularly Manchester, became a necessary step in reaching wider audiences and accessing appropriately scaled performance spaces.

Financial pressures were also a consistent part of the band's early journey. Like many emerging artists, they balanced their music career alongside other work, including performing in function bands and taking on paid gigs to support themselves. This often involved difficult decisions around prioritising income over certain performance opportunities, reflecting the broader challenge of sustaining a career in music during the early stages.

Rehearsal and development also required resourcefulness. The band used a range of spaces, including informal setups and temporary arrangements, to rehearse and refine their sound. Access to suitable, long-term rehearsal space was not always straightforward, requiring adaptability and persistence.

Alongside these practical challenges, the experience of navigating the grassroots scene also varied depending on environment. Lloyd noted that smaller venues and informal settings could sometimes feel less structured or professional, particularly in comparison to

larger venues further along their journey. While this has improved over time, it highlights the importance of well-managed and supportive environments for emerging artists.

Despite the need to expand beyond Wigan to progress, maintaining a strong connection to the borough has remained an important part of the band's identity. The Lottery Winners have continued to represent Wigan as their home, keeping that association visible as their profile has grown.

This connection is also reflected in their ongoing engagement with the local community. The band has been involved in activities such as school visits and youth-focused projects, helping to raise awareness of opportunities within the music industry and encouraging young people to explore creative pathways.

Their journey from local grassroots performances to national recognition demonstrates both the strength of Wigan's early-stage music environment and the challenges of sustaining long-term artist development within the borough. Since emerging from the local scene, The Lottery Winners have achieved multiple UK chart successes, including a number one album, performed at major festivals such as Glastonbury and Reading & Leeds, and toured extensively across the UK and internationally. This progression is reflected in their upcoming milestone of headlining their first stadium show at Leigh Sports Village, marking a significant moment both for the band and for the borough. Their success provides a clear example of the level of achievement that can be reached from grassroots beginnings, while reinforcing the importance of ensuring that future artists have the structures and support needed to follow similar pathways.

CROSSING THE THRESHOLD INTO PROFESSIONAL PERFORMANCE

As artists move beyond early-stage development, progression becomes less clear and more difficult to navigate.

Access to gigs and opportunities is often shaped by informal networks rather than transparent pathways. This was reinforced through discussions with Kate Lloyd of The Lottery Winners, who reflected that Wigan's pubs, open mics and grassroots venues played an important role in helping the band build confidence, develop live skills and grow an early local following. However, she also described how progression beyond the grassroots level increasingly required moving outside the

“It's about who you know.”

Wigan & Leigh College student

borough, particularly into Manchester, due to a lack of local infrastructure. Lloyd further reflected that awareness of funding opportunities and industry support largely came later through management networks, rather than through visible local pathways or coordinated support systems within the borough.

A key issue is the absence of mid-sized venues. Without these stepping-stone spaces, artists are unable to gradually scale their live performance activity, making it difficult to build audiences and transition into larger opportunities locally.

Stakeholder engagement highlights both the challenges and opportunities within this space. Discussions with John Norcott, the new owner of The Monaco, identified the venue's potential to act as a key mid-level step within the progression pathway. As a 700-capacity venue, it is well positioned to bridge the gap between grassroots spaces and larger regional stages.

However, this role is shaped by the financial realities of operating at that scale. As Norcott noted, "It costs very little to not open the building. It costs a lot to open it." This highlights the balance that venues must strike between supporting emerging artists and delivering financially viable programming.

Without the ability to manage this risk, opportunities for developing artists at this level remain limited.

This is reflected more broadly across the sector. Promoters and venue operators consistently identified commercial viability as a key factor in programming decisions, meaning emerging artists are less likely to be booked unless they can demonstrate audience demand. This reinforces reliance on informal networks and limits access to progression opportunities.

At the same time, there are clear opportunities to strengthen this stage of the pathway. Alongside The Monaco, developments at Haigh Hall, Robin Park Arena, Leigh Sports Village and Stacks Wigan present the potential for larger-scale performance opportunities within the borough. Together, these spaces could form the missing middle and upper tiers of a local progression ladder.

For this to be realised, these venues must be supported to operate not only as standalone destinations, but as part of a connected system. This includes programming approaches that balance commercial viability with artist development, ensuring that emerging artists are given opportunities to progress alongside established acts.

Recommendations

2.3

Develop a Connected Venue Network

Strengthen links between grassroots, mid-scale and larger venues to support clearer artist progression pathways across the borough.

2.4

Develop a Mid-Sized Venue Support Plan

Support venues such as The Monaco through audience development and risk mitigation measures that enable more emerging artist programming.

2.5

Increase Transparency and Access to Opportunities

Create clearer routes into live performance, reducing reliance on informal networks and improving visibility of opportunities.

UNEQUAL ACCESS TO OPPORTUNITIES

Access to opportunities is not experienced equally across the sector. While barriers exist for all artists, evidence shows some groups face additional challenges that limit participation and progression.

“Short-notice opportunities can be difficult to access due to care needs.”

For disabled artists, access is often shaped by factors beyond the opportunities themselves. Engagement with ICan artists highlighted how inconsistent scheduling, short-notice bookings and inaccessible infrastructure can limit participation. These barriers affect not only performance opportunities, but also confidence, skills development and long-term involvement. Perceptions of increased risk from venues when booking disabled artists further reduce opportunities at an early stage.

Young people face a different, but equally significant, set of barriers. Focus groups with 14 to 17 year olds highlighted limited awareness of opportunities outside education settings, alongside restrictions on attending and performing at gigs due to age. Cost and transport were also identified as key challenges, with late-night event timings and travel costs limiting engagement with the live music scene. These barriers restrict participation at a critical stage of development.

Women and gender-diverse individuals also face barriers around confidence, representation and visibility, particularly in technical, production and behind-the-scenes roles. In stakeholder discussions, Kate Lloyd of The Lottery Winners reflected that she had sometimes felt “looked down upon” as a woman in music, noting this can happen “from the smallest pub to the biggest venue or festival.” She also highlighted the importance of representation, describing how girls during school visits said they “didn’t know you could do all these things” within the music industry. Projects such as SoundHerOut, delivered by The Snug, demonstrate the value of targeted initiatives that support women and girls to see themselves within music, not only as performers, but as sound engineers, producers, promoters, stage managers and wider industry professionals.

Barriers are also evident across different forms of music practice. DJs and electronic artists highlighted a lack of dedicated spaces and opportunities, limiting their ability to perform and develop locally. This suggests existing pathways are not fully inclusive of all genres, excluding some artists from progression routes altogether.

Financial barriers also shape participation. Stakeholder feedback highlighted the cost of instruments, equipment, rehearsal space and recording as key challenges, particularly for younger and emerging artists. Kate Lloyd reflected that early progression often depended on saving for essentials such as transport and recording:

“It was this kind of working-class thing, where you save up and then you can try and afford a van... saving up for recording, all

those things... We used to rehearse in my dad’s office after they’d finished work... and then get noise complaints.”

These pressures can limit development, particularly for artists without financial resources or support networks.

Overall, opportunities are not consistently accessible or inclusive, reinforcing inequality across the music ecosystem.

Recommendations

2.6

Increase Consistency of Performance Opportunities

Create more regular, transparent and accessible routes into live performance.

2.7

Ensure Inclusive and Accessible Pathways

Reduce barriers linked to age, access needs and genre, ensuring progression routes are more inclusive across the sector.

2.8

Develop a Grassroots Music Bursary Programme

Explore bursary support for equipment, rehearsal costs, recording, transport and other early-stage financial barriers to participation and progression.

Strategic Direction

Wigan’s challenge is not a lack of activity, but a lack of connected infrastructure to support progression.

Progression exists, but it is fragmented, difficult to navigate and not consistently accessible. As a result, artists leave the borough, opportunities are uneven, and talent retention is limited.

The opportunity is to strengthen and connect what already exists. By improving coordination between venues, education providers, cultural organisations and wider partners, Wigan can create a more visible and inclusive progression framework that supports artists to develop locally.

Over the next 5 years, this will help improve retention, strengthen progression pathways and build a more sustainable grassroots music ecosystem across the borough.

CASE STUDY: THE OLD COURTS

Strategic Infrastructure in Transition

The Old Courts is one of the largest and most established cultural organisations within Wigan, operating as a multi-purpose arts venue with the capacity to support both grassroots and touring live music. Its position within the borough places it at a critical point in the local music ecosystem, bridging the gap between smaller community-led spaces and larger-scale regional venues.

Following a period of organisational change, the venue is entering a new phase focused on refining its approach to live music programming. Rather than prioritising high volumes of events, there is a shift towards more targeted delivery, including a smaller number of touring shows and a broader range of genres. This includes an intentional move beyond traditional indie guitar-led programming, towards styles such as neo-soul, jazz, world music and reggae, reflecting both audience interest and a desire to diversify cultural offer within the borough.

Alongside programming changes, The Old Courts is placing increased emphasis on artist development. This includes work with young people and under-18 performers, as well as a wider focus on preparing artists for professional practice. A key insight emerging from this work is the extent to which musicians lack access to funding knowledge and financial skills. Many artists continue to operate within a self-funded model, with limited understanding of how to access support, negotiate fees or manage income effectively. Addressing these gaps through workshops, mentoring and shared toolkits is seen as a critical step in strengthening the local music sector.

The venue also highlights wider structural challenges affecting live music delivery. Audience behaviour has shifted in recent years, with increased reliance on last-minute ticket purchasing and greater sensitivity to cost. At the same time, concerns around town centre safety, particularly for late-night events, are seen as a barrier to attendance. These factors create additional risk for venues operating at a mid-scale level, where programming requires higher audience thresholds to remain viable.

Despite these challenges, The Old Courts represents a significant opportunity within Wigan's music ecosystem. Its scale and infrastructure position it as a potential stepping stone for artists progressing beyond grassroots venues, while its organisational capacity creates opportunities for leadership in areas such as collaboration, knowledge sharing and sector development.

The venue's emphasis on partnership working and shared learning reflects a wider need for coordination across the borough. Current activity is often fragmented, with organisations operating independently rather than as part of a connected system. Strengthening these relationships is seen as essential to unlocking the full potential of the local music scene.

Within the context of this strategy, The Old Courts illustrates both the challenges and opportunities facing mid-scale cultural infrastructure. Its future role will be critical in supporting artist progression, diversifying programming and contributing to a more connected and sustainable music ecosystem across Wigan.

CHAPTER 3: SPACES & INFRASTRUCTURE

Overview

Wigan has a broad range of spaces that support music programming, from grassroots venues and community buildings through to larger civic sites. Across the borough, there is clear evidence of live music taking place in a variety of settings, including venues such as Fatbird, Lemon Street Social Club and The Monaco, alongside local festivals and the growing use of non-traditional spaces through initiatives such as The Early Doors Club.

Venue	Estimated Capacity	Type / Role Within Ecosystem
The Snug	100	Grassroots venue supporting emerging artists, intimate live music and community-led programming
Fatbird Live Lounge	170	Independent live music venue supporting grassroots artists, local bands, tribute acts and regular open mic activity
Lemon Street Social Club	200	Mid-level community venue supporting local gigs, touring acts and artist progression opportunities

The Boulevard	250	Independent grassroots venue supporting touring artists, local showcases and progression opportunities for developing acts
The Old Courts	300	Multi-purpose arts centre and established grassroots music venue with regional touring activity
Stacks Wigan	500	Town centre food hall and entertainment venue supporting regular live music, DJs and large-scale social programming within Wigan's evening economy
The Monaco	700	Large-format venue with potential to bridge the gap between grassroots venues and larger regional touring spaces
Haigh Hall	Variable / Festival Scale	Heritage and outdoor event space capable of hosting large-scale cultural events, festivals and live music activity

Leigh Sports Village	Stadium Scale	Large civic venue capable of hosting major headline concerts, sporting events and large-scale audience activity
Robin Park Arena	Stadium Scale	Major indoor and outdoor events complex capable of supporting large-scale concerts, touring productions, sporting events and regional live entertainment activity

This demonstrates that infrastructure does exist, and that there is both the appetite and the capability to deliver live music across different scales. The use of cafés, churches and community spaces shows how existing buildings can be adapted to support grassroots activity, while larger sites such as Haigh Hall, Leigh Sport Village & Robin Park present opportunities to expand the borough's capacity for larger events.

However, across consultation, stakeholder engagement and survey responses, a consistent challenge emerges: infrastructure is not lacking, but it is fragmented, uneven and not always aligned to how artists develop.

Access to rehearsal, recording and creative development spaces varies depending on availability, cost and location. While some artists and organisations are able to access suitable facilities locally, others rely on informal, temporary or out-of-borough solutions. At the same time, key parts of the wider music infrastructure, including venues, rehearsal spaces and creative workspaces, are under pressure due to financial constraints and changing town centre dynamics.

As a result, the current system does not consistently support progression. Spaces exist, but they are not always connected, accessible or configured in a way that enables artists to move through the local ecosystem.

CASE STUDY: LEMON STREET SOCIAL CLUB

The Need to Support New Grassroots Infrastructure

Lemon Street Social Club opened in Tyldesley in March 2026 with the ambition of creating new opportunities for artists, audiences and young music professionals across Wigan Borough. As a new 250-capacity venue, its vision extends beyond simply hosting gigs. It aims to provide a platform for emerging artists, create opportunities for young people interested in live sound and production, and bring established artists into the borough to help inspire and develop the next generation.

The venue was founded in response to a challenge identified throughout this Music Plan: the lack of progression opportunities available to artists within the borough. Reflecting on his own experience as a member of The Lottery Winners, Rob Lally highlighted how limited local infrastructure shaped the band's early development:

“When we started, our options of music venues to play in our hometown of Leigh were limited to zero, so we cut our teeth in the pubs and function rooms. But, I think if there was a strong selection of venues in the area, our path to where we currently are on our journey would have happened a lot sooner.”

The venue's ambition is not only to provide performance opportunities, but to help young people see a future within the music industry. Through engagement with local schools and aspiring creatives, Lemon Street Social Club aims to demonstrate that careers in music are achievable and that opportunities can exist locally rather than requiring people to leave the borough to progress.

“What we'd like to do is to be able to make the younger generation, in all aspects of this industry, feel like there is a future and a living to be made. To do this, they need opportunity. We'd like to be that opportunity.”

However, the venue also highlights a wider challenge facing grassroots music infrastructure. Despite strong community support and positive early feedback, sustaining independent music venues remains difficult within an environment of rising costs, financial risk and limited resources. As identified throughout this strategy, new venues are often expected to deliver cultural, social and economic benefits while operating with limited financial resilience.

As Lally reflects:

“I fear that without us getting the support we need to sustain, we could very easily become another statistic of a reason why that extra support is needed. Working class artists have so much to say, we want to give them a platform to say it.”

Within the context of this strategy, Lemon Street Social Club demonstrates why supporting grassroots infrastructure is about more than protecting individual venues. It is about creating the opportunities, spaces and pathways that enable future generations of artists to develop locally. Its story highlights both the ambition that exists within the borough and the need for sustained investment if that ambition is to be realised.

Creative Space & Infrastructure Gaps

Access to rehearsal, recording and creative development space is one of the most consistently identified challenges across the borough.

Space / Organisation	Primary Role Within Ecosystem
Leigh Spinners Mill / Spinners Studios	Creative hub containing rehearsal rooms, artist studios, recording activity and wider creative workspace
Creative Spin Studios	Artist development and youth creative activity space within Leigh Spinners Mill
The Music Centre	Instrument tuition and music education facilities based at Leigh Spinners Mill
Urban Sound Rehearsal Studios	Dedicated band rehearsal studios in Aspull
The Old Courts	Multi-purpose arts centre providing rehearsal, performance and artist development space
The Snug	Grassroots venue supporting artist development, live performance and community-led programming

Fatbird Live Lounge	Independent grassroots live music venue supporting local artists and regular live programming
Pier Music Collective	Grassroots music organisation supporting rehearsal, collaboration and creative development activity
The Lounge Recording Studio	Professional recording and production studio
TMP College	Music education, rehearsal and production facilities
Wigan Music Service	Youth ensemble rehearsal and music education provision
Wigan Youth Zone	Youth music participation and creative activity programmes

While these spaces form an important part of the borough's grassroots music infrastructure, the overall level of dedicated creative provision remains limited relative to the size of Wigan Borough and the scale of activity identified through consultation. Stakeholder feedback also highlighted the fragility of existing infrastructure, with several rehearsal, recording and grassroots music spaces having closed, reduced activity or faced increasing financial pressure in recent years. This has further reduced access to affordable and stable environments for artists to rehearse, record, collaborate and develop work locally.

Stakeholder feedback suggests that while the borough has an established network of grassroots and creative spaces, much of the existing provision operates at small scale and with limited long

term capacity. Demand was particularly strong around affordable rehearsal space, recording facilities and stable creative environments where artists can regularly rehearse, collaborate and develop work locally.

Consultation feedback highlighted a clear lack of affordable and accessible rehearsal space, with this receiving the highest number of votes in the public prioritisation exercise. Participants repeatedly identified limited availability, high costs and difficulty accessing suitable spaces as key barriers to development.

Survey data reinforces this:

- 43.1% of artists report having regular access to rehearsal space
- 49.0% identify finding rehearsal space as one of their biggest challenges

This suggests that while some provision exists, access to it is inconsistent and often constrained.

Cost is a significant factor. Focus group participants reported rehearsal spaces costing £30–£40 per session, limiting regular use, particularly for emerging artists and young people. As a result, many rely on informal or temporary spaces, including homes, offices or borrowed rooms, which are not always suitable for consistent development.

“We didn’t really have anywhere to rehearse.”

This lack of provision directly impacts collaboration and progression, particularly for bands and artists working in shared environments.

Recording and production infrastructure presents a similar challenge. While some access exists, consultation feedback highlighted a lack of visible, affordable studio space within the borough. Survey responses show that 19.6% of artists identified access to equipment or recording facilities as a key support need, reinforcing demand for improved provision.

These challenges are particularly pronounced for young people and education providers. Survey responses from educators show:

- 63.6% identified lack of suitable space as a key barrier
- 63.6% also identified lack of funding

This indicates that physical infrastructure is a limiting factor not only for artists, but for early-stage engagement and skills development.

Beyond rehearsal and recording, additional infrastructure gaps were identified, including:

- lack of accessible storage for equipment
- limited shared resources across organisations, including backline equipment, PA systems, lighting and technical infrastructure
- absence of integrated creative spaces combining rehearsal, recording and performance

At the same time, stakeholder discussions highlight clear opportunities to address these gaps through more effective use of existing buildings. Cultural hubs such as Leigh Spinners Mill demonstrate how underused spaces can be repurposed to provide low-cost rehearsal environments, while hybrid models combining youth access and professional hire offer potential routes to long-term sustainability.

This approach aligns with the borough's wider Cultural Asset Strategy, which identifies the importance of maximising existing buildings and infrastructure to support cultural activity, rather than relying solely on new provision. Across the borough, there are also a number of underused or vacant buildings that present a clear opportunity to be repurposed as rehearsal, recording and creative spaces, reducing the need for new-build development.

This also aligns with the established "Agent of Change" principle, which places responsibility on new development to mitigate impacts on existing cultural and live music venues. Embedding this principle within local planning and development processes would help protect existing grassroots music infrastructure as the borough continues to evolve and regenerate.

Overall, the issue is not simply a lack of space, but a lack of coordinated, accessible and affordable infrastructure to support consistent creative development.

Recommendations

3.1**Develop a Coordinated Rehearsal and Creative Space Strategy**

Map existing provision and expand access to affordable rehearsal and recording facilities across the borough.

3.2**Improve Access to Equipment and Shared Resources**

Introduce shared infrastructure models, including equipment and storage, to reduce barriers for artists and organisations.

3.3**Support Flexible Use of Existing Buildings**

Enable underused spaces, including town centre and community buildings, to be adapted for music activity through targeted investment and support.

3.4**Establish a Coordinated Music Space Support Role**

Secure resource for a dedicated coordination role to help map, manage, promote and improve access to rehearsal, recording and performance spaces across the borough, supporting stronger collaboration between venues, artists and organisations.

CASE STUDY: BOULEVARD

A Long-Standing Venue Under Pressure

Boulevard is one of Wigan town centre's longest-standing music-led venues and remains an important part of the borough's grassroots music infrastructure. Since opening in 2006, the venue has maintained music as a core part of its identity, with live performance continuing to be the main reason many people attend, particularly at weekends. Its history reflects both the resilience of a long-running independent venue and the wider changes that have reshaped Wigan's live music ecology over the last two decades.

The venue's role has evolved alongside the wider town centre. In its earlier years, Boulevard operated within a much broader network of live music spaces, with multiple venues regularly hosting bands and events. That wider ecosystem has since reduced significantly, with a number of venues closing, changing use or moving away from live music altogether. As a result, Boulevard now sits within a much smaller group of venues sustaining regular live music activity in Wigan.

Music remains central to the venue's identity, but programming has had to adapt in response to changing audience behaviour and financial realities. Tribute acts and covers provide a more consistent and reliable audience, while original music is more difficult to sustain on a regular basis. Original shows can still perform well, particularly within specific formats or events, but attendance is inconsistent and difficult to rely on week to week.

Despite these challenges, the venue continues to support grassroots music where possible.

Activity has included under-18 events, battle of the bands and opportunities for young musicians to develop their live experience. In some cases, artists have progressed from early informal performances within the space to headline slots at larger events, demonstrating the venue's potential role within the wider development pathway.

The financial pressures affecting the venue are significant. Rising energy costs, business rates, staffing and supply costs have all impacted operations. Since Covid, the venue has reduced its opening pattern, focusing activity on the busiest days of the week to avoid operating at a loss. Opening on quieter days is no longer financially viable without sufficient footfall, reflecting a broader challenge across the sector.

For the promoters there, the economics of grassroots shows remain difficult. Ticket sales are often unpredictable, with the majority of sales occurring close to the event date, making it difficult to plan and manage financial risk. At Boulevard, the promoter model removes some upfront costs by providing the space, sound engineer and equipment, but income is dependent on ticket sales alone, with no access to bar revenue. This creates a narrow margin for viability, particularly for original music events.

Wider changes in audience behaviour have also influenced how the venue operates. Later nightlife patterns, increased pre-drinking and reduced casual footfall in the town centre have all contributed to declining early evening attendance. As a result, live music timings have shifted later over time, which in turn affects the ability to

sustain regular programming and attract consistent audiences.

External factors continue to shape attendance. Public transport reliability, particularly late-night train services, has affected audiences travelling from outside the borough, while rising local hotel costs have reduced the viability of overnight stays for touring audiences. These factors have had a direct impact on previously strong event formats, particularly those that relied on visitors travelling into Wigan.

Within the town centre, broader decline presents an ongoing challenge. A reduction in surrounding venues, hospitality and retail offer has limited the overall appeal of the night-time economy. Fewer reasons to visit the town centre places additional pressure on venues to generate footfall independently, particularly on nights without major headline activity.

Within the context of this strategy, Boulevard represents both a key asset and a clear indicator of sector pressures. It continues to provide a space for live music within Wigan and has a proven track record of supporting grassroots activity. At the same time, its experience highlights the challenges of maintaining regular programming in a changing economic and cultural environment, where financial risk, audience inconsistency and wider town centre dynamics all influence the sustainability of grassroots venues.

VENUE LADDER & SPACES ACTIVATION

Wigan has a range of venues and performance spaces, but they do not currently operate as a coordinated or consistently activated system.

Consultation and stakeholder engagement highlight that while physical infrastructure exists, its use is often constrained by operational, financial and programming factors. As a result, spaces are not always used to their full potential, and opportunities for live music are shaped as much by how venues operate as by what physically exists.

This is reinforced by survey data from venues and promoters:

- 83.3% describe running grassroots gigs as somewhat or very risky
- 66.7% identify financial risk and low ticket sales as a key challenge

This indicates that while spaces are available, there is limited capacity to absorb risk, which directly impacts how often and how flexibly they can be used.

This is reinforced by wider stakeholder feedback across the venue sector. Discussions with local venue operators highlighted that rising operational costs are directly impacting the frequency of live music programming. At

Boulevard, this has resulted in a reduction in the number of shows being delivered, as increasing costs and financial risk make regular programming more difficult to sustain.

“For the longest time we were open every single day apart from Christmas Day... we had bands on every weekend and Sundays were booming. Since Covid, once the energy prices went up, it got to the point where every time we opened the door, we were making a loss... so we started shutting days, one by one... now we’re down to Thursday, Friday, Saturday.”

This represents a shift from near full-week operation to a reduced three-day model, significantly decreasing the number of live music opportunities available within the space.

This reflects a broader trend where venues remain active, but are operating with reduced capacity, limiting the number of opportunities available to artists.

Stakeholder discussions identified The Monaco as another key example. As a mid-sized venue, it represents a significant asset within the borough, with the capacity to host larger audiences and more established acts. However, it is currently underutilised in this role.

“We’re probably running at 20%. We’re only open two or three times a month at the moment. I want to be open three or four days a week.”

This highlights the gap between the physical capacity of the space and how it is currently being used. Norcott also described an ambition for the venue to become “a creative hub for putting stuff on,” reinforcing the potential for The Monaco to play a wider role in the borough’s cultural infrastructure if supported through the right programming, audience development and risk-mitigation models.

At the same time, there are examples where infrastructure is being used more effectively. The Old Courts demonstrates the role that a well-programmed, mid-scale venue can play within the local ecosystem, supporting a range of activity across different audience types. However, it also operates within its own constraints, reinforcing the need for a broader, more connected approach across multiple sites.

Alternative models also highlight opportunities for more effective space activation. Initiatives such as TyldesleyFest demonstrate how multiple smaller venues can function as a connected network, collectively supporting a larger and more diverse programme of activity. This distributed approach shows how coordination and proximity between venues can increase overall capacity without requiring new infrastructure.

Larger civic spaces also represent an underused part of the borough’s infrastructure. Haigh Hall has the capacity to host significant outdoor events and expand overall event provision, but is not currently embedded as a regularly activated music space. This highlights

the opportunity to better integrate civic assets into the wider music ecosystem.

Taken together, this evidence suggests that the borough's challenge is not simply one of provision, but of coordination and activation. Spaces exist, but they are not consistently aligned, connected or supported in a way that maximises their potential.

Recommendations

3.5**Improve Coordination Across Venues and Spaces**

Support collaboration between venues, promoters and organisations to enable more joined-up programming and use of space.

3.6**Support Flexible and Sustainable Venue Operation**

Provide support to help venues balance financial viability with more diverse and developmental programming.

3.7**Integrate Civic and Underused Spaces Into Regular Use**

Support the activation of sites such as Haigh Hall as part of the borough's ongoing music infrastructure.

ACCESS, INCLUSION & SUITABILITY OF SPACES

Consultation highlighted that access to music spaces is not experienced equally across the borough. While venues and infrastructure exist, they are not consistently designed or operated in a way that supports inclusive participation or meets the needs of different users.

Barriers identified include:

- physical access limitations, such as stairs and restricted layouts
- lack of appropriate facilities within venues
- environmental factors, including lighting and sensory conditions

For some participants, accessibility is not embedded within the space itself, but instead managed on a case-by-case basis:

“Accessibility depends on who you speak to.”

This creates inconsistency across the sector, where access is not guaranteed and often relies on individual communication rather than established standards.

A further barrier identified through stakeholder engagement is the lack of clear, publicly available information about accessibility. Many venues do not publish accessibility policies or provide clear guidance on facilities, making it difficult for individuals with access needs to determine whether a space is suitable in advance.

Stakeholder discussions with education providers also highlighted the importance of communication-based accessibility, particularly for neurodivergent young people and those requiring additional support. This included the need for clear advance information about venues, layouts, timings, transport and event environments to help individuals feel prepared and confident attending unfamiliar spaces.

TMP College noted that uncertainty around venues and event environments can itself become a barrier to participation, particularly where individuals require additional time or information to prepare for new situations.

This lack of transparency creates a barrier at the earliest stage of engagement. In practice, it means individuals are required to contact venues directly or attend without certainty, which can discourage participation altogether.

As a result, accessibility is not only shaped by the physical characteristics of a space, but also by how clearly and consistently information about that space is communicated. Where this information is absent or unclear, spaces may be perceived as inaccessible regardless of their actual provision.

Feedback from disabled artists and organisations highlighted that these barriers affect not only attendance, but participation. Inconsistent access can limit opportunities to perform, rehearse and engage with the wider music community, particularly at early stages of development.

Suitability of spaces was also raised as a broader issue. Existing venues are not always designed to support different forms of music practice or performance. For example, electronic and DJ artists highlighted a lack of appropriate environments and equipment, limiting their ability to perform and develop locally.

This suggests that infrastructure is not only uneven in access, but also in how well it supports different types of activity.

Young people face additional barriers. Consultation with 14-17 year olds identified limited awareness of where music activity takes place, alongside restrictions related to age, transport and venue policies:

“We didn’t know where to go to play gigs.”

This indicates that existing spaces are not consistently designed to support early engagement or entry-level participation, creating gaps at the beginning of the development pathway.

Taken together, this suggests that access, inclusion and suitability are not yet embedded within the borough’s music infrastructure. While spaces exist, they are not consistently designed, equipped or communicated in a way that enables broad and equal participation.

Recommendations

3.8

Improve Accessibility Across Music Spaces

Support venues to address physical barriers, facilities and environmental factors to enable wider participation.

3.9

Develop Consistent Standards for Inclusive Spaces

Encourage a shared approach to accessibility and inclusion across venues, including the clear communication of accessibility information and facilities.

3.10

Support a Wider Range of Music Activity

Ensure spaces are equipped and adaptable to support different genres and forms of music practice, including electronic and DJ-based activity.

3.11

Improve Access for Young People

Support the development of youth-friendly opportunities and improve visibility of entry points into the local music scene.

Strategic Direction

This chapter highlights that Wigan’s challenge is not a lack of music spaces, but how those spaces are used.

While the borough has a range of venues and assets, they do not currently operate as a coordinated or consistently activated system. Activity is constrained by financial risk, gaps in the venue ladder and

inconsistent access, limiting participation, artist progression and the ability of venues to grow audiences sustainably over time.

At the same time, there is clear potential within the existing infrastructure. Stakeholders expressed strong ambition to increase programming, expand use of spaces and support a wider range of activities.

The priority, therefore, is not simply to create new spaces, but to better activate and connect those that already exist.

A more coordinated approach to music infrastructure would:

- increase the frequency and diversity of live music activity
- strengthen progression opportunities for artists
- improve resilience and long-term audience development across the venue network
- support more inclusive participation across the borough

Over the next several years, the priority will be to better connect, activate and sustain the spaces that already exist. By improving coordination between venues, creative spaces, artists and cultural organisations, Wigan can build a more resilient and visible grassroots music infrastructure that supports talent development, expands participation and enables a broader range of music activity to take place locally.

Rather than operating as isolated venues and organisations, the borough's music infrastructure should function as a connected ecosystem capable of supporting artists, audiences and communities at multiple levels of activity and progression.

CHAPTER 4: ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY & FUNDING

Overview

This chapter examines the financial sustainability of Wigan Borough's grassroots music ecosystem, focusing on how activity is funded, how income is generated, and how financial risk is distributed across the sector.

The evidence suggests that much of the borough's grassroots music activity is delivered through small independent operators, freelancers, community-led organisations, CICs and charities, many of which operate with limited financial resilience and rely on a combination of earned income, project funding and voluntary capacity. This reflects wider national trends across the grassroots music sector, where organisations often operate on narrow margins and with

limited long-term financial security.

The evidence highlights a structural challenge: the ecosystem is economically fragile, with limited income pathways, low funding awareness, and reliance on models that are often informal or difficult to sustain. Survey data shows low awareness of funding across both artists and educators, alongside strong demand for financial support as a route to progression.

Financial pressure is evident across the sector. Artists face limited paid opportunities and inconsistent income, while venues operate on tight margins, balancing rising costs with the need to keep events accessible. As a result, financial risk sits largely at the grassroots level, shaping both programming decisions and long-term sustainability.

Funding also plays a wider role. It supports participation, enables inclusion, and allows activity to take place that would otherwise be

financially unviable. Where used effectively, it can reduce risk and strengthen the wider ecosystem.

At the same time, the external funding landscape is evolving, with increased national and regional focus on grassroots music. This creates a clear opportunity, but one that is not yet fully realised locally.

Improving economic sustainability will therefore depend not just on increasing funding, but on strengthening how resources are accessed, distributed and used across the sector. While external funding plays an important role in enabling activity, long-term resilience cannot rely on grant support alone. Grassroots music organisations remain vulnerable to wider economic and political change, alongside increasing competition for limited funding. Alongside improved access to investment, there is also a need to explore more sustainable financial models, stronger partnership working, diversified income streams and approaches that reduce financial risk across the wider ecosystem.

CASE STUDY: THE SNUG

A Grassroots Catalyst

The Snug has emerged as one of the most active grassroots music spaces within Wigan's recent cultural resurgence. The venue has evolved into a small but influential platform for original live music, providing regular performance opportunities for emerging artists and helping to rebuild momentum in the borough's grassroots ecosystem.

Operating at a smaller scale than traditional mid-sized venues, The Snug focuses primarily on original music programming and community-led events. Its model prioritises artist development, audience accessibility and experimentation, offering a low-barrier entry point for bands beginning their live performance journeys. In an environment where many venues face financial pressures that

encourage commercially safer programming, The Snug has deliberately centred original grassroots acts as a core part of its identity.

The venue is also female-led and places a strong emphasis on representation within its programming. Efforts are made to ensure that women and gender-diverse artists are consistently represented across line-ups, reflecting a wider commitment to creating inclusive grassroots spaces. Alongside its live music programme, The Snug also delivers community initiatives such as Sound Her Out, a project designed to empower women by encouraging them to consider careers within the music industry. Not only as performers, but across roles such as production, promotion and technical work. This approach reflects a broader ambition to widen participation in the music sector and strengthen pathways for underrepresented groups.

A defining moment in the venue's recent history came when The Snug became part of the Music Venue Trust's Music Venue Properties (MVP) initiative, a national scheme designed to protect grassroots venues from closure by securing community ownership of their buildings. In 2023, The Snug was selected as the 1st venue to be acquired in the first round of acquisitions by Music Venue Properties, supported by community investment and sector-wide backing. The initiative attracted national attention as a pioneering approach to safeguarding grassroots cultural infrastructure. By placing the venue's building into protection for music use, in the form of a long-term cultural lease, the programme significantly strengthened The Snug's future security and highlighted Wigan as an example of how local scenes can benefit from national sector support.

The venue has also played a role beyond hosting shows. Through initiatives such as The Early Doors Club, The Snug has explored alternative programming formats designed to broaden participation. Early evening events have proven particularly effective at attracting audiences who may not attend traditional late-night gigs, including younger attendees, families and those reliant on public transport. These experiments demonstrate how programming innovation can help address some of the accessibility and audience challenges identified during the consultation process.

Crucially, The Snug operates as a community-led cultural space rather than a purely commercial venue. Its activity relies heavily on volunteer effort, local collaboration and financial support from a range of external funders, which helps sustain its programme of grassroots events and ensures that artists can be paid fairly for their performances. This funding support has enabled the venue to maintain a focus on original music and artist development despite the financial limitations associated with operating at a small capacity. As with many grassroots venues nationally, balancing fair pay for artists with affordable ticket prices remains a constant challenge.

Despite these pressures, The Snug demonstrates the potential impact of locally driven cultural initiatives. By prioritising original music, supporting emerging artists and experimenting with inclusive programming models, it has helped to re-establish live music activity in the borough and rebuild audience confidence. In doing so, it provides a working example of how grassroots venues can function as cultural incubators, nurturing talent, fostering community participation and forming the foundation of a wider music ecosystem.

Within the context of this strategy, The Snug illustrates both the strengths and limitations of grassroots-led regeneration. Its success shows what can be achieved through local initiative, partnership and national sector support, while also reinforcing the need for stronger infrastructure, coordination and long-term investment to ensure that grassroots momentum can translate into sustainable growth across the borough.

FUNDING ACCESS & LITERACY

Survey data highlights limited awareness of funding opportunities across Wigan Borough's grassroots music ecosystem, with very few respondents confident in how to access or apply for support. This is despite a growing range of regional and national funding programmes aimed at supporting grassroots music activity, including support available through organisations such as Arts Council England, Youth Music, PRS Foundation and Help Musicians.

Among artists, 37.3% reported no awareness of available funding opportunities, while only 7.8% said they both know about funding and understand how to apply. A similar pattern is evident among music educators. No respondents reported confidence in both awareness and application, and 36.4% said they are aware of funding but do not feel confident applying.

This points to a clear gap between what funding exists and who is able to access it. Awareness alone is not enough, with confidence, knowledge and support emerging as key barriers.

Survey responses reinforce this. Beyond awareness, artists also identified barriers around confidence and application processes.

13.3% described funding applications as too complicated, while others referenced uncertainty around eligibility, lack of confidence and not knowing where to seek guidance.

For educators, the impact is more direct. 63.6% identified lack of funding as a key constraint in delivering music activity with young people, alongside 63.6% citing lack of suitable space. This suggests that funding challenges are not only limiting progression, but actively restricting delivery.

Stakeholder feedback reflects this. The Old Courts identified gaps in understanding around applications, budgeting and financial processes, suggesting that practical support could improve access.

Overall, funding within the borough appears to be under-accessed rather than unavailable. Without clearer guidance and support, individuals and organisations are unlikely to make full use of existing opportunities, limiting both progression and wider sector development. However, increased awareness alone will not resolve these challenges. Competition for external funding is high, with limited success rates nationally, meaning that alongside improving confidence and application quality, there is also a need to support more diverse and sustainable income models across the sector.

Recommendations

4.1**Establish a Borough-Wide Funding Support and Access Programme**

Deliver coordinated workshops, one-to-one support, practical guidance and clear signposting to help artists, venues and organisations understand available funding opportunities, develop stronger applications and improve confidence in accessing financial support.

4.2**Create Clear and Accessible Funding Signposting**

Develop a simple, centralised resource that outlines relevant funding opportunities, eligibility criteria and application processes, reducing confusion and improving access across the sector.

4.3**Build Financial and Professional Literacy Within the Sector**

Support training in budgeting, invoicing, fundraising, funding applications, business development and financial planning to improve confidence, diversify income opportunities and enable more sustainable participation in the grassroots music ecosystem.

VENUE ECONOMICS & PROGRAMMING RISK

Consultation and stakeholder evidence indicate that grassroots music venues across the borough are operating within financially constrained and increasingly fragile conditions. Rising costs, inconsistent audience behaviour and limited income streams are shaping how venues programme activity and manage risk.

Stakeholder discussions highlighted the scale of these pressures. Venue operators referenced rising energy costs, increasing supplier prices and wider cost-of-living impacts as key challenges affecting day-to-day viability. In some cases, this has led to reduced opening days and fewer opportunities to programme live music.

Alongside rising energy, staffing and supply costs, stakeholders also identified wider fixed

overheads such as business rates as an additional pressure affecting the long-term sustainability of grassroots music venues.

As one venue operator described:

“Every time we open the door, we’re making a loss.”

These challenges are reflected nationally. Music Venue Trust (MVT) has worked with grassroots music venues and local authorities across the UK to ensure venues received appropriate emergency Business Rates relief, including within Wigan Borough. MVT is also advocating for a dedicated valuation framework for grassroots music venues, recognising their cultural and community value rather than treating them solely as commercial assets. Such reforms could help reduce financial pressure on venues and strengthen their long-term sustainability.

This reflects the challenge of balancing operating costs against uncertain returns from live events.

Income generation is limited. Many venues rely heavily on bar revenue to subsidise live music, with ticket income alone often insufficient to cover costs. As a result, programming decisions are closely linked to expected footfall and spend, rather than purely artistic considerations.

Stakeholder feedback also highlighted limited flexibility in ticket pricing. While operating costs have increased, there is little scope to increase prices without affecting attendance.

As one participant described:

“You can’t really push ticket prices up... people just won’t come.”

This creates a ceiling on income, where ticket sales alone are unlikely to cover the full cost of delivering events. In turn, this limits the ability to increase artist fees or reinvest in programming.

Audience behaviour adds further pressure. Attendance is increasingly driven by familiarity and perceived value, with audiences less likely to take risks on unknown artists. This creates uncertainty when programming grassroots acts, particularly where advance ticket sales are limited.

As one promoter noted:

“People aren’t buying tickets until the last minute... you don’t know if it’s going to break even.”

In some cases, this uncertainty exists even where pricing barriers are removed:

“We even tried free entry and were still getting 10-15 people in.”

This shows that financial risk is not just linked to ticket price, but to wider patterns of demand and engagement.

As a result, venues are often pushed towards more risk-averse programming. Stakeholder feedback highlighted a shift towards tribute acts, established artists and commercially proven formats to ensure more predictable attendance.

As one venue operator explained:

“We have to fill the diary up with tribute bands... it’s not really what I want to do.”

While this supports short-term viability, it limits opportunities for emerging and original artists, reducing space for experimentation and development within the local scene.

This tension is particularly clear in independent and mid-sized venues, where there is limited capacity to absorb financial losses. Larger-scale events face similar pressures at a different level, requiring significant upfront investment and prioritising more commercially reliable programming.

Overall, programming decisions across the borough are being shaped by economic necessity rather than artistic intent. Without intervention, this risks reinforcing a cycle where safer activity is prioritised, limiting opportunities for grassroots artists and narrowing the local music offer.

Recommendations

4.4

Provide Targeted Financial Support to De-risk Grassroots Programming

Introduce funding or subsidy models that reduce the financial risk of programming emerging and original artists, enabling venues to maintain a diverse programme alongside commercially viable events. This should include collaborative approaches between venues and promoters to share costs, audiences and programming risk, supported through partnership-based funding models.

4.5

Support More Sustainable Operating Conditions for Venues

Explore measures to reduce core operating pressures, including energy costs, business rates and access to capital investment, improving long-term financial stability.

4.6

Explore Targeted Business Rates Relief and Local Financial Support Mechanisms for Grassroots Venues

Work with local partners to explore how existing local authority tools, including business rates relief and cultural support mechanisms, could help improve the long-term sustainability of grassroots music venues and creative spaces.

4.7

Advocate for National Policy Measures That Support Grassroots Music Sustainability

Support wider sector calls for structural changes that improve the long-term viability of grassroots music activity, including measures relating to VAT on tickets, touring costs and venue sustainability.

ARTIST INCOME, FAIR PAY & FINANCIAL PROGRESSION

Survey and consultation evidence indicate that artists within the borough face significant challenges in generating consistent and sustainable income from music.

Survey data highlights the scale of this. Only 5.9% of respondents reported that music is their main source of income, while 58.8% earn income only occasionally and nearly 10% are not yet earning from music at all. "Lack of paid gigs" was identified as one of the most common challenges.

This reflects a broader pattern of income instability, with artists unable to rely on music as a consistent source of earnings. Many supplement their activity through other work, limiting the time and capacity available for creative development.

Qualitative evidence reinforces this. Consultation discussions highlighted low and inconsistent pay, with many artists performing for minimal fees or, in some cases, without payment. Deal structures were a particular concern, with a clear distinction drawn between fair and exploitative approaches.

Ticket-split models combined with a guaranteed fee were generally seen as a reasonable way of sharing risk between artists, promoters and venues. However, concerns were raised around arrangements with no guarantee, or where artists are required to sell a set number of tickets in advance.

As one participant described:

"You're selling loads of tickets and still not really making anything."

These types of pay-to-play or zero-guarantee models were seen as placing disproportionate financial risk on artists, particularly at entry level. In these cases, artists are expected to drive ticket sales without any certainty of income.

Focus group feedback also highlighted a lack of transparency in deal structures and payment distribution, with some participants reporting unclear agreements and inconsistent returns. This creates an imbalance between the effort required and the financial reward received.

Without reliable income, artists face ongoing financial pressure, making it difficult to sustain long-term engagement with music. Early-stage progression often involves significant personal investment, including recording, transport and equipment costs.

As Kate Lloyd (The Lottery Winners) reflected, progression often relies on self-funding and financial risk-taking, with limited access to structured support.

"You got to put all your time into it, haven't you? And more... which is really difficult when you've got no financial help."

Lloyd also reflected that much of the band's early

progression relied on balancing original music with paid work, including wedding bands and part-time jobs, in order to continue developing as artists.

“Sometimes we’d be turning down festival slots because we had a wedding that night... we needed the money from that.”

Consultation discussions also pointed to the need for clearer expectations around payment. The idea of baseline or minimum fees emerged as part of wider conversations around fair pay and professionalisation.

As one participant described at our consultation event:

“There needs to be some kind of baseline... otherwise people will just keep undercutting each other.”

Overall, artist development within the borough is shaped not only by access to opportunities, but by the financial conditions attached to them. Without more consistent income pathways and clearer payment standards, progression remains uncertain.

Recommendations

4.8

Promote Fair and Transparent Payment Practices

Encourage the use of clear, standardised deal structures across the borough, including ticket splits with guarantees where possible, to ensure financial risk is shared more equitably between artists, promoters and venues.

4.9

Develop Guidance on Minimum Payment Expectations

Work with sector partners to establish recommended baseline fees or payment principles for grassroots performances, supporting greater consistency and reducing reliance on unpaid or underpaid work.

4.10

Create More Paid Performance Opportunities for Emerging Artists

Support programmes, funded events and showcase platforms that prioritise fair artist payment, helping to build sustainable income pathways and reduce early-stage financial barriers to progression.

EXTERNAL FUNDING LANDSCAPE & STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITY

The challenges around artist income, venue sustainability and programming risk sit within a wider landscape that is beginning to shift in favour of grassroots music.

The external funding landscape for grassroots music has expanded in recent years, with increased recognition of its cultural, social and economic value at both regional and national levels. This creates a clear opportunity for Wigan Borough to strengthen its grassroots music ecosystem, provided that local structures are in place to access and use this investment.

A range of funding streams are now available to support grassroots activity, including Arts Council England, Youth Music, PRS Foundation, Help Musicians and the National Lottery Community Fund, alongside place-based cultural regeneration programmes.

However, access remains uneven. Funding is often competitive and can be complex to navigate, favouring organisations with existing capacity and experience. As highlighted earlier in this chapter, low awareness and limited confidence in applying mean that local artists and organisations may not be making full use of available support.

Alongside these funding streams, wider developments are beginning to reshape how grassroots music is supported nationally. The Grassroots Music Levy, led by the Music Venue Trust, represents a significant shift in approach. Based on a voluntary contribution, typically £1 per ticket from arena and stadium shows, the levy redistributes income from large-scale commercial activity into the grassroots sector.

At present, the levy operates on a voluntary basis, supported by participating artists and promoters. However, there is increasing recognition that if uptake remains limited, a statutory levy may be introduced. This reflects a broader move towards a more consistent funding model for grassroots music.

To manage this, the sector has established Live Trust, an independent body responsible for distributing levy funds, with a focus on transparency and long-term sustainability.

Funding generated through the levy is intended to support venues, infrastructure and overall resilience. A key focus is reducing operating costs and improving touring viability, including investment that lowers the cost of hosting and delivering live music.

By reducing these pressures, there is potential to support longer and more geographically diverse tours, increasing the likelihood that towns outside major city centres, such as Wigan, are included in national touring routes.

This reflects challenges identified locally. As one promoter noted:

“The hotel prices around the area have massively increased... the costs of putting gigs on are just a lot higher than they were a few years ago.”

At a regional level, the Greater Manchester Combined Authority has identified the creative and cultural industries as a key growth sector, with a focus on place-making, skills development and inclusive economic growth. Music forms a central part of this, creating opportunities for alignment with borough-level priorities.

Nationally, there is also increased focus on venue sustainability and the recognition of grassroots music as essential cultural infrastructure.

At a local level, there is also growing recognition of the role culture can play in regeneration, place-making and economic development. Leigh has been put forward to become the UK’s first Town of Culture, reflecting wider ambitions to place culture and creativity at the heart of the town’s future development. While broader than music alone, initiatives of this scale can create opportunities for grassroots music to connect with wider cultural investment, strengthen local partnerships and contribute to the borough’s cultural identity and visitor economy. They can also help raise the profile of the area when seeking external investment, opening potential routes to future cultural, regeneration and place-based funding programmes.

Together, these developments demonstrate that grassroots music is increasingly being recognised not only as a cultural activity, but as a contributor to economic growth, community wellbeing and place-based regeneration.

Recommendations

4.11

Position Wigan to Access National Grassroots Investment

Proactively, and in collaboration at a borough level, engage with national initiatives, including the Grassroots Music Levy and Live Trust, to ensure that local venues and organisations are well positioned to benefit from emerging funding streams and pilot programmes. Align this work with wider cultural and regeneration opportunities, including Leigh’s Town of Culture ambitions and other place-based investment programmes.

4.12

Support Infrastructure that Strengthens Touring Viability

Encourage and support investment in venue infrastructure and local partnerships that reduce the cost of touring, improving the borough’s ability to attract and sustain touring artists as part of national circuits.

Strategic Direction

The evidence in this chapter highlights a financially fragile model across Wigan Borough's grassroots music ecosystem. Limited funding awareness, inconsistent income pathways and rising operating costs are affecting both artist progression and venue sustainability, with financial risk largely concentrated at the grassroots level.

At the same time, there is a clear opportunity. Increased national investment, the development of the Grassroots Music Levy and wider regional priorities around culture and economic growth

create a more supportive environment than has previously existed.

The challenge is not only to increase funding, but to improve how resources are accessed, distributed and used across the sector, while also exploring alternative operating models that support long-term sustainability and reduce reliance on short-term external investment alone.

Over the next 5 years, the priority will be to build a more resilient and financially sustainable grassroots music ecosystem across the borough.

This will require a coordinated approach focused on four key areas:

1

Funding Access & Literacy

Improving awareness, confidence and capability across artists, venues and organisations to ensure that existing funding opportunities are more effectively accessed and understood.

2

Fair Pay & Sustainable Artist Pathways

Supporting more consistent and transparent payment practices, alongside increasing the availability of paid opportunities to enable more viable long-term artist development.

3

Venue Sustainability & Risk Reduction

Reducing financial pressure on venues and enabling more balanced programming, supporting both commercial viability and grassroots development.

4

Strategic Positioning & Investment Readiness

Ensuring the borough is well positioned to engage with emerging national funding mechanisms, including those linked to the Grassroots Music Levy, while aligning with wider regional economic and cultural priorities and opportunities linked to place-based cultural investment, including Leigh's Town of Culture ambitions.

By strengthening financial resilience, diversifying income approaches and improving access to opportunity, Wigan can support a grassroots music ecosystem that is better equipped to sustain activity, nurture talent and support long-term cultural growth across the borough.

PRIORITISED ACTION PLAN

The recommendations throughout the strategy are designed to be delivered over a five-year period, recognising that strengthening Wigan Borough's grassroots music ecosystem will require both immediate intervention and longer-term structural development. The following action plan groups the strategy's priorities into short, medium and long-term phases, identifying where early coordination, investment and partnership working can build the foundations for longer-term sustainability, growth and cultural impact across the borough.

Short Term Priorities (0–2 Years)

Improve Visibility, Access & Audience Connection

- Develop a centralised "What's On" platform
- Strengthen cross-venue promotion and collaboration
- Provide targeted marketing support for grassroots artists and promoters
- Align programming with transport realities
- Improve connectivity and access to venues
- Expand hyper-local and distributed delivery models
- Support safe and active night-time environments
- Align programming with safer and more accessible timeframes
- Expand inclusive formats and alternative delivery models
- Embed inclusion within event design and delivery

Strengthen Artist Development Pathways

- Establish a clear progression framework
- Strengthen links between education and live music
- Increase transparency and access to opportunities
- Ensure inclusive and accessible pathways
- Increase consistency of performance opportunities
- Develop a grassroots music bursary programme

Stabilise Existing Infrastructure

- Improve coordination across venues and spaces
- Support flexible and sustainable venue operation
- Improve accessibility across music spaces
- Develop consistent standards for inclusive spaces
- Establish a coordinated music space support role
- Improve access for young people

Improve Economic Resilience

- Promote fair and transparent payment practices
- Develop guidance on minimum payment expectations
- Deliver targeted funding support and application guidance
- Build financial and professional literacy within the sector
- Explore targeted business rates relief and local financial support mechanisms for grassroots venues

Medium Term Priorities (2–5 Years)

Build a Connected Venue & Talent Ecosystem

- Develop a connected venue network
- Develop a mid-sized venue support plan
- Support audience development and more balanced programming
- Reduce risk for audiences engaging with new artists
- Rebuild a culture of regular live music attendance
- Create more paid performance opportunities for emerging artists

Expand Creative Infrastructure

- Develop a coordinated rehearsal and creative space strategy
- Improve access to equipment and shared resources
- Support flexible use of existing buildings
- Integrate civic and underused spaces into regular use
- Support a wider range of music activity

Strengthen Sector Coordination & Sustainability

- Support collaborative approaches to programming and risk-sharing
- Position Wigan to access national grassroots investment
- Support infrastructure that strengthens touring viability
- Advocate for national policy measures that support grassroots music sustainability

Long Term Ambition (5+ Years)

Over the longer term, the ambition is for Wigan Borough to operate as a connected, sustainable and nationally recognised grassroots music ecosystem, where:

- artists can progress locally through clear development pathways
- venues and creative spaces operate collaboratively and sustainably
- audiences regularly engage with live music across the borough

- grassroots music contributes to civic identity, economic activity and cultural participation
- music infrastructure is protected, inclusive and embedded within wider regeneration and cultural planning
- Wigan is recognised regionally and nationally as a borough actively investing in grassroots music, talent development and cultural infrastructure.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Chapter 1: Access, Audience & Visibility

Visibility & Discovery

- 1.1 - Develop a centralised “What’s On” platform
- 1.2 - Strengthen cross-venue promotion and collaboration
- 1.3 - Provide targeted marketing support for grassroots artists and promoters

Transport, Geography & Access to Activity

- 1.4 - Align programming with transport realities
- 1.5 - Improve connectivity and access to venues
- 1.6 - Expand hyper-local and distributed delivery models

Safety, Confidence & the Wider Environment

- 1.7 - Support safe and active night-time environments
- 1.8 - Align programming with safer and more accessible timeframes

Audience Behaviour & Cultural Shift

- 1.9 - Support audience development and more balanced programming
- 1.10 - Reduce risk for audiences engaging with new artists
- 1.11 - Rebuild a culture of regular live music attendance

Inclusion, Affordability & Alternative Models

- 1.12 - Expand inclusive formats and alternative delivery models
- 1.13 - Embed inclusion within event design and delivery

CHAPTER 2: Skills, Talent & Progression

The Progression Framework

- 2.1 - Establish a clear progression framework
- 2.2 - Strengthen links between education, live music & creative careers

Crossing the Threshold into Professional

- Performance
- 2.3 - Develop a connected venue network
- 2.4 - Develop a mid-sized venue support plan
- 2.5 - Increase transparency and access to opportunities

Unequal Access to Opportunities

- 2.6 - Increase consistency of performance opportunities
- 2.7 - Ensure inclusive and accessible pathways
- 2.8 - Develop a grassroots music bursary programme

CHAPTER 3: Spaces & Infrastructure

Creative Space & Infrastructure Gaps

- 3.1 - Develop a coordinated rehearsal and creative space strategy
- 3.2 - Improve access to equipment and shared resources
- 3.3 - Support flexible use of existing buildings
- 3.4 - Establish a coordinated music space support role

Venue Ladder & Spaces Activation

- 3.5 - Improve coordination across venues and spaces
- 3.6 - Support flexible and sustainable venue operation
- 3.7 - Integrate civic and underused spaces into regular use

Access, Inclusion & Suitability of Spaces

- 3.8 - Improve accessibility across music spaces
- 3.9 - Develop consistent standards for inclusive spaces
- 3.10 - Support a wider range of music activity
- 3.11 - Improve access for young people

CHAPTER 4 – Economic Sustainability & Funding

Funding Access & Literacy

- 4.1 - Establish a borough-wide funding support and access programme
- 4.2 - Create clear and accessible funding signposting
- 4.3 - Build financial and professional literacy within the sector

Venue Economics & Programming Risk

- 4.4 - Provide targeted financial support to de-risk grassroots programming

4.5 - Support more sustainable operating conditions for venues

4.6 - Explore targeted business rates relief and local financial support mechanisms for grassroots venues

4.7 - Advocate for national policy measures that support grassroots music sustainability

Artist Income, Fair Pay & Financial Progression

4.8 - Promote fair and transparent payment practices

4.9 - Develop guidance on minimum payment expectations

4.10 - Create more paid performance opportunities for emerging artists

External Funding Landscape & Strategic Opportunity

4.11 - Position Wigan to Access National Grassroots Investment

4.12 - Support Infrastructure that Strengthens Touring Viability

THANK YOU

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Looking Forward

This plan and the recommendations within it mark the beginning of a long-term journey. A journey towards a healthier, more connected and more accessible music ecosystem, where talent is nurtured, opportunities are visible and creativity can thrive.

Wigan's musical story is already rich with achievement. The challenge now is to build on those foundations and ensure future generations of artists, audiences and communities can play their part in writing the next chapter.

This Plan Is For You

For the artists creating new music, the venues opening their doors, the promoters taking risks, the educators inspiring the next generation, the volunteers giving their time, and the audiences who continue to support live music across the borough.

Together, you are the grassroots music ecosystem of Wigan Borough. The future of that ecosystem will be shaped not by this document alone, but by the people, partnerships and passion that brought it into existence.

This plan is for you.

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