

MAYOR OF LONDON

# Night Surgery Westminster





LYRIC

APOLLO

THE UP STAIRS MUSICAL

JERUSALEM

JUNGLE CAVE

WAIT

## Night Surgery: Westminster

**London's Night Czar, Amy Lamé, reflects on her night surgery in the West End, hosted by the Heart of London Business Alliance (HoLBA).**

**The visit covered some of the Central Activities Zone's densest clusters of night time activity, including Piccadilly Circus, Leicester Square and Theatreland. With question marks remaining over the lasting impacts of the pandemic and hybrid working, HoLBA is working closely with stakeholders and Westminster City Council to develop a dedicated evening and night time strategy for the area.**

The West End is an area whose identity and economic health relies heavily on post-6pm activity and the visitor economy. It's also among the areas most severely impacted by the pandemic. HoLBA has drafted an evening and night time strategy and action plan, working with Westminster City Council and engaging local businesses, residents and workers. The strategy, due to be published later this year, will complement HoLBA's existing placeshaping and cultural strategies and is supported by an evidence base, which includes an economic case for investment. The night surgery was a chance to discuss opportunities for the area, hear from those working there and help identify where investment is most needed.

## St James's Piccadilly

The forecourt of St James's Church on Piccadilly was bustling with people heading to an event with the poet and mental health campaigner, Hussain Manawer, part of the church's 'In conversation with...' series and delivered in partnership with the nearby Waterstones bookshop.

Reverend Lucy Winkett and her team spoke about the activities and events hosted there and their plans to further diversify the church's cultural programme. The church prides itself as an inclusive space and incubator for creativity, something backed up by the appointment of a Creative Director. The church is also one of the major homelessness charities in the area, providing a food bank and outreach services.

Regular evening concerts and talks extend the church's daytime uses, which include free lunchtime concerts and a market. It was brilliant to hear about plans for a new music programme, which is set to attract local residents, workers and visitors alike, and reinforce the church's role as a place where people from all walks of life can connect through music. Plans for a night market, offering an atmospheric setting for food, drink, socialising and dancing, are also underway. Officers from Westminster City Council and HoLBA added further ideas to the table, such as evening film screenings, performances and pop-up theatre.

The team at St James's has developed strong partnerships with businesses and other institutions along Piccadilly too, including Fortnum and Mason and the Royal Academy of Arts. These types of partnerships are so important in creating a sense of community and stewardship of an area at night. HoLBA is exploring further ways to strengthen their network of night time stakeholders as part their strategy.

With the church providing a focal point and meeting place for various communities in the area, I was keen to discuss amenities for night workers and how the church and HoLBA's night time strategy could pilot and progress projects dedicated to their wellbeing. This is a conversation I look forward to continuing as their strategy develops.



St James's Church, Piccadilly



Audience inside St James's Church, Piccadilly

## Waterstones

Waterstones on Piccadilly claims the title of the largest bookshop in Europe. The shop adjusted its opening hours in response to reduced footfall brought by the pandemic, but is looking to extend the current 8pm closing time to 9pm as tourists return and trade picks up. Before the pandemic, the shop was open until 10pm every day.

We heard that footfall peaks when colleges and schools in the area finish and staff have seen a growing audience of young people. The manager estimated that 70% of their customers are now youngsters and pointed to social media apps, such as TikTok, as major contributors to the store's popularity.

In the past, Waterstones has organised quizzes, live music and events in their café space. They have recently introduced a cheese and wine menu in their bar to attract new audiences and encourage shoppers to stay and enjoy the views from the Grade I listed Art Deco building. The West End has a wealth of architectural heritage and it was great to see local businesses and institutions capitalising on these assets after 6pm, with the historic townscape hosting or forming the backdrop for life at night.



Waterstones on Piccadilly



Waterstones café and wine bar

## Boots

My next stop was the flagship Boots on Piccadilly Circus. Established in 1925, the 'Day and Night Store' was open 24/7 with the stated aim of improving access to healthcare. I've been fascinated to read about the history of the store and was grateful to staff for giving up their time for what turned out to be a really eye-opening conversation for all present.

We heard how the pharmacy provides an emergency healthcare service, with calls to the NHS's 111 helpline sometimes directing callers there as the closest place to access first aid. The pharmacist described their role as 'the last stop for first aid' and told us about the range of emergencies they had attended to – from treating diners suffering from allergic reactions to dealing with people who have overdosed, to administering life-saving CPR. I was taken aback by the work of these unsung heroes and will be back to learn more about their experiences and perspectives – insights we'll share through our Night Portrait series.

While the pharmacy closes at 11pm, staff work on site overnight to process deliveries, demand for which has significantly increased since the pandemic. Security at night was a primary concern for them and they spoke highly of My Local Bobby, private security wardens commissioned by HoLBA to support the police. The scheme provides 24 hour back-up to security teams, helping businesses deal with issues that might arise outside their premises.





Boots



Piccadilly Circus

## Rupert Street night market

This was the council's third night market since October 2021, activating the side street between the Apollo and Gielgud theatres. The previous market celebrated Chinese New Year and the theme for this one was 'Secret Westminster', showcasing upcoming makers and designers in the borough.

Following the success of the first two night markets, the event saw daytime traders keen to stay open later to capitalise on the increased footfall and sense of occasion. One stall holder had previously occupied a vacant retail unit on Oxford Street as part of the council's pop-up programme for start-ups.

Informal seating, live music and festoon lighting added to the character of the street as a social space and helped create quite a buzz. I spoke to some really inspiring stall holders – plumbers who had turned their hands to making gin, self-confessed former 'fast fashion addicts' who had started a clothing up-cycling business over lockdown, and artists and craftspeople from the council's adult social care programme.

I was happy to hear how closely the council's market team was working with their data and communications colleagues. With support from our external consultants, they had established a set of KPIs and measures of success to track the impacts of the market, help inform where adjustments might be required and make the case for ongoing investment and resources. It was great to hear about the support their night markets had received from local residents and businesses alike and I look forward to the next one!



Rupert Street night market



Live music at Rupert Street night market

## Leicester Square

Leicester Square regularly attracts large groups of people and has historically been a hotspot for crime and antisocial behaviour, day and night.

I spoke to officers from the Met Police and My Local Bobby wardens, who enjoy a good partnership in the area. They told me that theft and other discreet offences are more prevalent during the day, with more visible and violence-related crimes more common at night. Businesses also told me that the My Local Bobby service helps provide a reassuring, visible presence at night, as well as supporting the police in tackling anti-social behaviour and low-level crime.

I heard how initiatives like My Local Bobby and the council's 'Night Stars' programme had seen some of the issues in the square improve significantly, but there is still work to do. Some continue to feel unsafe in the area, so the council, businesses and HoLBA are continuing to work together to not only make the area safe – and feel safe – but welcoming and inclusive too.

We visited the manager and staff at McDonald's, who have been proactive in their efforts to improve safety on the square. Whenever I'm speaking about safety at night, I always highlight the informal but vital role that late night chains like McDonalds play in providing safe spaces and access to toilets for people throughout the night, including women seeking refuge from domestic violence. It was great to meet the branch's designated Women's Night Safety Champion and see the business actively promoting women's safety in the area at night.

While the garden at the heart of the square was closed by the time we arrived, the square was busy with people, including young children. We reflected on the missed opportunities of the garden closing at dusk and discussed its potential to offer an alternative, complementary setting for activities in the square later into the evening – whether that be informal socialising and play, or programmed events.

HoLBA showed us around the 'Scenes on the Square' public art project – a series of bronze sculptures dotted around the square, surrounding rooftops and façades, depicting well-known characters from films. The project was designed to help reinforce the square as the 'home of cinema'.



Leicester Square gardens



My Local Bobby wardens on Leicester Square

## The Odeon

The Odeon is active throughout the day and night and has seen visitor numbers after the pandemic starting to grow. On some nights, screenings will start at midnight, attracting audiences eager to be the first to catch the next blockbuster release. The latest James Bond film screened at midnight, playing into the early hours before screening again at 7am for early morning audiences.

The staff I spoke to expressed concerns about transport to and from work at night. Some feel less safe using night buses than the tube, so the pausing of Night Tube services after the pandemic had really impacted their commute. Although its reinstatement on Friday and Saturday nights was welcomed, the building operates 24 hours a day across the whole week, leaving staff having to use alternative and, for some, less comfortable transport modes from Sundays to Thursdays. Other concerns from staff included anti-social behaviour outside the cinema during the weekends and staff shortages.

With potential applicants and existing employees increasingly attracted to employers offering at least the London Living Wage, it was great to be joined by a representative of the Broadcasting, Entertainment, Communications and Theatre Union (BECTU). They described pay freezes and pay cuts over the course of the pandemic as creating extremely challenging conditions for workers in the theatre and entertainment industries and that lobbying and support are more important than ever as the cost of living continues to rise.



Odeon on Leicester Square



Leicester Square

## London Coliseum

We concluded the night surgery at the London Coliseum on St Martin's Lane, home of English National Opera (ENO), where we were greeted by long-serving front of house staff and a security supervisor – some of whom are the fourth generation of their family to work for ENO.

The last guests typically leave at 10:30pm each night, but the staff work later – sometimes until 1:30am – carrying out debriefs and administrative work. Show nights can see 20-40 members of stage crew working until 4am and security staff are on site throughout the night, so the building operates 24 hours a day. Staff tend to take the night bus home, with stage crew taking cabs during the early hours. The nearby Co-op supermarket on the Strand was cited as a useful amenity for night workers, being open 24 hours a day.

Although the theatre usually stages musicals and operas, each attracting quite different audiences, a recent collaboration with Fabric nightclub introduced live electronic music to the venue for the first time. The show brought together two of London's most iconic cultural institutions and allowed the music of dancefloors to be enjoyed in the spectacular setting of the Coliseum, which opened almost a century before Fabric was born. The staff were enthusiastic about the show and hopeful for further collaborations that bring new experiences to the historic building.

Outside the theatre, HoLBA told us of their proposals for improvements to the public realm on St Martin's Lane. Their plans explore opportunities to improve accessibility, create space for outdoor dining and timed access for servicing to optimise the use of space at different times of the day in this busy part of London.





Edith Cavell Memorial and St Martin-in-the-Fields



Inside London Coliseum



☾

GIEL

## Final thoughts

The night surgery was a striking reminder of the different layers of activity taking place at night in an area that is at once a home, a workplace and one of the world's most famous destinations for night time culture and entertainment. Some of the activities and communities are in plain sight and others are hidden, but they all contribute to a 24 hour ecosystem that is fundamental to the UK's economic and cultural health - and to London's status as a global city.

I was really delighted to see HoLBA investing in the area at night and bringing their members and wider stakeholders together for the night surgery to discuss what could be improved. It was also great to see the council investing in the life of the area from 6pm to 6am and piloting new events and initiatives that reinforce a sense of place and community, boost local businesses, and provide opportunities for start-ups in the borough.

The development of a night time strategy is a great way to bring these various projects and partners together and pool resources. I very much look forward to reading HoLBA's draft strategy and working with the council to build on this work as they develop their own strategy for the borough.

# MAYOR OF LONDON