

MAYOR OF LONDON

# Night Surgery Camden







ROUNDHOUSE

CHALK FARM  
Belton Park  
Hamstead  
Swiss Cottage  
Kilburn

## Night Surgery: Camden

**In May, Amy Lamé conducted a night surgery in Camden Town, one of London's best known centres for night life and culture. The night surgery was organised by the council in partnership with the Roundhouse, who hosted an engagement event on the night to ask gig-goers what makes a great night out in Camden.**

**The engagement will inform the development of the council's night time strategy, for which the council is currently developing an evidence base, building upon research carried out on their high streets during the summer of 2021.**

As a Camden resident, I was thrilled to join councillors, officers and staff at the Roundhouse for a night surgery in Camden Town on 18 May. The council recently began work on the evidence base for their night time strategy, which will also be informed by a citizens' assembly. It was brilliant to discuss a range of issues that the strategy could address.

The council is building on their recent research and engagement on high streets, where night time was highlighted as a key theme across the borough. In parallel, the Roundhouse has been exploring ways to make their venues as safe and inclusive for their audiences as possible and, along with my team, helped the council draft a survey to find out what contributes to a great night out in Camden. The survey was piloted during the night surgery, with a view to being extended to other venues and stakeholders.

## The Roundhouse

The evening started in the foyer of the legendary Roundhouse music venue. As a music fan, I've visited many times and it exemplifies the multiple roles that music venues can play in town centres. Aside from hosting live music and events in a spectacular Grade II\* listed building, the Roundhouse has bars, kitchens, recording studios, rehearsal rooms and a studio theatre under one roof, creating its own mini ecosystem of complementary uses and audiences. Later this year, they will also open a state-of-the-art creative centre, including rehearsal spaces, a podcast studio, and co-working space for 18-30 year olds.

With creativity and community at the heart of the venue's ethos, it was a natural partner for the council to collaborate with to pilot a survey about people's experiences of Camden at night – to understand what works well and what could be improved for different types of people.

Roundhouse staff spoke to me before their shift to share their experiences of working in Camden at night. We talked about their commute to and from the venue and thoughts on what makes a good night time employer and attractive night time venue.

Access to phone chargers was identified as a basic and important amenity – for staff and customers – to make sure they can make calls or look up directions at night. Another suggestion was to introduce a street pastor scheme, similar to the Soho Angels or Westminster's Night Stars. Staff said they sometimes felt as if they were the only sober people in the public realm late at night and, if they came across people in need of help, they felt unable or unqualified to assist. They thought that having trained street wardens would provide a reassuring presence and an easily identifiable group to approach for help. The group even suggested a name for the pastors – The Sober Brigade.

The Roundhouse has a policy of reimbursing taxi fares for staff travelling home past midnight, which was described as a real deal-breaker when it came to night shift work. Staff explained that the provision of door-to-door transport home, which for most would otherwise be prohibitively expensive, makes late shifts more attractive, especially in an area that some felt could be a bit intimidating or unsafe at night. Staff also asked about the Night Tube. While there was growing demand for the service to be extended to more tube lines, TfL is currently working to restore the Night Tube to its pre-pandemic levels of service across five lines.

Staff expressed their passion for their work and the Roundhouse as an employer. They viewed it as a safe and inclusive place to work and a great place to socialise. We asked what they thought was missing from Camden





The Roundhouse bar



Engagement panels

Town at night and heard that a wider range of food options – and healthier food, in particular – would be welcome after their shifts. This is a request I hear frequently from those working at night, with late night food offers geared towards those on a night out, rather than those working.

Staff told me that they had perceived a shift in audience behaviours after the pandemic, with some instances of people having panic attacks in large crowds. This has only reinforced the importance of well-trained staff and security in dealing with people in need of support. The Roundhouse has regular, in-house security, which helps – the staff know the venue and each other very well and are embedded and invested in the venue's inclusive and supportive culture.

As we wrapped up our discussion with the venue's staff, the audience for the evening's gig started to arrive. The council had designed and set up a comments board behind the bar to canvas opinions about the experience of a night out in Camden. Staff had already begun to populate the board, with audience members adding their own thoughts and suggestions. This was a simple and interactive way to gather opinions from people who might not usually contribute to a council consultation. Having this in the venue made it more accessible and prompted more of a conversation around responses.

Roundhouse staff seemed very sensitive to audiences' needs, something evidenced by both staff and audience feedback. I spoke to visitors with neurodiversities who felt welcome and included at the venue in a way they had not in others. This was to do with clear wayfinding and signage, a very legible layout of spaces and the welcoming and friendly manner of security staff on arrival.





HOW'S YOUR NIGHT?  
MAKE NIGHTS OUT MORE INCLUSIVE  
AFTER?  
QR code



## Chalk Farm Station

At Chalk Farm Station I met community wardens, the Met Police, the Camden Town Unlimited BID and the TfL station manager. I heard that businesses and the community wardens meet weekly with the Met Police to discuss challenges and priorities in the area at night. This half hour check-in every week was described as a really valuable and efficient way to share intelligence and help pool resources.

Dedicated police officers were assigned to Camden Town at the end of 2021. Part of the Met's 'Town Centre Team', they provide a more consistent on-street presence at night, patrolling the high street and Camden Lock.

Camden Town remains busiest on Friday and Saturday nights, apparently bucking the trend of other town centres in central London, which have seen a shift in the balance of peak hours, with Thursday nights becoming busier over the past year.





Chalk Farm station

## Camden Market

The market is central to Camden Town's character and identity as a destination.

Stalls cater to visitors and local workers over lunchtime and trade is very good at weekends. On weekday nights, however, the market is quiet and many of the stalls are closed and shuttered. We discussed opportunities to test later opening hours to make the most of the infrastructure and prime canal-side setting, with the potential to attract footfall as tourism returns, as well as cater for local residents and workers.

We heard that the market operators are looking to bring in more experience-led activities, themed around Peaky Blinders and Tomb Raider. Plans for a ferris wheel are also being discussed.

LabTech, the owners of the market, employ seven security staff who remain on site until the gates are locked at 3am. The security team is familiar with anti-social and criminal behaviour taking place in the market area and they described a notable shift in its atmosphere after midnight. It would be interesting to map opening hours in the market and high street to understand how these might contribute to that shift in character. The market owners and operators said they would like to see increased police presence in the market itself, as they are not able to tackle criminality.

The market is at the heart of a business community, so developing a strong vision for its future will be critical. Planning for evening and night time activity will be part of this. It has the infrastructure to support a thriving night time ecosystem and a ready-made setting for a unique after-dark destination.





Camden market



Camden lock



## Inverness Street

As well as being a globally recognised tourist destination, research from the council's high streets team evidenced Camden High Street's importance to a large local population. The vision for the high street includes attracting local families out later and the council is exploring opportunities for on-street events and markets.

Inverness Street is pedestrianised and has an interesting mix of retail and hospitality businesses. Many of the retailers close early and the street was quite quiet during my visit, despite hospitality venues being open and benefitting from the use of extensive outdoor seating.

I spoke to the owner of Nikiits Off-Licence, a family-run business that has been operating for 15 years. The shop predominantly serves customers who live or work locally and closes at 11pm. The owners described issues with underage customers trying to buy alcohol and cigarettes, estimating that they'd confiscated between 500 and 600 fake IDs from under 18s.

The owners think the street has not fully recovered from lockdown, with footfall still below pre-pandemic levels. They raised concerns about anti-social behaviour on the street after 10pm, particularly at weekends. Although the area has a Pubwatch and radio system for licensed venues, retailers are not included. Late-opening shops would really benefit from being on the same system as licensed venues, helping to share information and resources.



Inverness Street



Inverness Street

## Mecca Bingo

Our next stop was Mecca Bingo on the corner of Arlington Road. The building, formerly a cinema, was converted into a bingo hall 20 years ago and is open until 11:30pm during the week and midnight at weekends. The manager explained that some bingo halls in London stay open until 3am.

On the night I visited, there were around 70 or so people inside and the manager told us that upwards of 200 people visit for sessions at weekends. Customer numbers are still between 60-80% of what they were pre-pandemic. While some were still reluctant to return due to fear around catching COVID-19, others had simply developed new routines and interests over successive lockdowns.

The bingo hall attracts a lot of regulars, many of them older people. The manager likened the venue to a local pub, with a strong sense of community and sense of belonging for regular customers, who know staff very well. This was something I witnessed first-hand and it was wonderful to see older people out enjoying Camden's night life. This close relationship to the community is also part of the reason why staff at the bingo hall stay for many years – it forms an extended family. The owner himself lives outside of London but is happy to commute to work and was passionate about the venue, its staff and customers.

We heard about plans to renovate the space and diversify the venue's audience by hosting a wider variety of events and themed nights. Staff are already seeing more drop-ins from younger people at weekends. The bingo hall has a wide catchment area and benefits from excellent transport connections, although the lack of parking is a barrier for some.





Arlington Road



Mecca Bingo

## Camden High Street

To end the night surgery, we walked down Camden High Street towards Mornington Crescent. We were all struck by the stark change in character of the street from north to south. The street felt noticeably darker and emptier south of Camden Town Station, with unilluminated and shuttered shopfronts, less architectural lighting and a shift in the type of streetlighting, all contributing to the change in character and vibrancy. The street was also less busy, with fewer places open and less visible activity.

The southern end of the high street has many alleyways leading off it that feel dark and are not overlooked by active frontages. The lack of light and visible activity at street level really impacts perceptions of safety and vitality on this section of the high street, which forms an important destination for local people and hosts many night bus stops. The alleyways contribute to the overall experience of the high street, forming part of the street frontage. We discussed the importance of including them in any public realm and street frontage improvements being planned.

We ended the night outside KOKO, by Mornington Crescent Station. It was great to see the venue open again and people enjoying the roof terrace. We discussed how views up towards KOKO and Mornington Crescent Station could be improved to create a more positive and recognisable vista up the southern end of the high street at night. We also discussed public toilet provision, including where these are located so that they don't negatively impact the public realm, but equally are easily identifiable and not too isolated.



Camden High Street, north of Camden Town station



Camden High Street, north of Camden Town station





KOKO

Morrington Crescent

## Final thoughts

The night surgery served as another reminder of how useful it is to bring councillors, officers and stakeholders together to walk around town centres at night. Even people who have worked on the high street for many years often find out something new about how it operates during night time walkabouts with stakeholders.

It was great to see the partnership between the council and Roundhouse teams and the effort and thought that had gone into organising the engagement event and pulling together the survey. I look forward to reading the findings and a big thank you goes out to the Roundhouse for hosting us!

During my visit, I saw lots of positives and some exemplary night time businesses. We also identified lots of untapped potential and areas that could be improved, so I'm excited to see how the borough's night time strategy addresses these.

# MAYOR OF LONDON