



Westminster City Hall,
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London SW1E 6QP

CLLR RACHAEL ROBATHAN
Leader of the Council

Rt. Hon. Robert Jenrick MP
Secretary of State for Housing,
Communities and Local Government

21 August 2020

Dear Robert,

in Westminster we are already doing a large amount of work to support hospitality businesses to reopen safely, as well as our new 'Sightsee Crowd Free' Campaign and planned 'Inside Out' cultural offer. These are all designed to draw more people back into the centre of London. I thought you might find a short summary of this work helpful, focusing on six key areas, and I strongly urge that your Government use this letter as a basis for future thinking rather than overlaying new initiatives on top of it.

1) Cycling, walking and hospitality support schemes

Westminster's Movement Strategy created 19,000sq.m of additional pavement space to allow for safer travel by foot and has introduced 11km of new cycleway to encourage locals and tourists to enjoy Westminster on two wheels. Westminster has also led the way nationally in supporting the hospitality industry to reopen by creating more than fifty temporary alfresco dining locations. This has allowed hundreds of bars, pubs and restaurants to open safely where it may have been unviable for them to do so if confined to their indoor space. Thousands of people have already returned safely to the streets of major West End locations, such as Soho, Chinatown and Mayfair and this has proved even more popular throughout August when aligned with the successful Eat Out to Help Out scheme. We would very much welcome Government support to sustain some of the best initiatives we have implemented.

2) Campaigns to promote the West End and its businesses

For a number of months, the Council has been running "Shop Local" and "Eat Local" campaigns to encourage people to support their local economy. At the start of August, we launched our new Sightsee Crowd Free (#SightseeCrowdFree) campaign to encourage the safe return of visitors to enjoy the sights of the West End without the hassle and inconvenience of large crowds.

Targeted initially at those from outer London boroughs and the Home Counties, this time-limited campaign is promoting the West End through targeted social media campaigns, working with high-profile social media influencers and supported with constant engagement and media messaging. We have been working in close collaboration with stakeholders, including Westminster's Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), major landowners and cultural institutions.



The Sightsee Crowd Free campaign is also acting as a prelude to our 'Inside Out' cultural offer. Inside Out will run from the early Autumn and will offer a significant programme of exciting and innovative activities, ranging from live performances to visual installations, outdoor exhibitions and "open house" style events. Inside Out also aims to appeal to a diverse mix of audiences; access to culture has been accused in the past of being elite and exclusive and this is something we want to address. Through Inside Out we aim to appeal to new audiences, encouraging engagement and accessibility to a new wave of clientele who will enjoy coming back to the West End in years to come.

The detail is still to be confirmed but we are working on delivering projects with the Crown Estate in partnership with MArt, the Exhibition Road Cultural Group, including the iconic cultural institutions of South Kensington, Grosvenor, the Society of London Theatre, the National Gallery, the Royal Opera House, Mayfair Art Weekend and The Photographers' Gallery and virtually all other major West End cultural institutions. I would welcome Government and Mayoral support for both Sightsee Crowd Free and Inside Out. Such support would be in the form of amplifying the local messaging rather than creating a different, conflicting campaign over and above what is already happening with the support of many businesses in the West End.

3) Planning

To maximise our chances of successful recovery, we also need urgent action to ensure reforms in planning do not undermine recovery. We need a radical rethink of where we stand on transport policy and we need to tweak elements of licensing law and business rate relief.

While I welcome the spirit of the proposed Government reforms to use class orders, there is a risk that these undermine the unique mix of commercial uses across the West End that make it a global economic centre. Much of the West End is vulnerable to these changes and we want to protect the iconic retail offers and high streets that make the West End so appealing to tourists from across the world. This also means protecting office space which drives so much discretionary spend in the West End. Therefore, I am asking you to consider providing central London boroughs devolved powers to introduce sensible local use class orders and maintain our powers to issue Article 4 directions. This will allow protection of certain vital commercial uses where there is substantial evidence they will be at risk. West End businesses have told us they need to be able to act flexibly in order to generate new forms of revenue, without the restrictions of land designation.

4) Transport

There is an urgent need both to improve confidence in public transport and to make policy changes to ensure our limited street space is used by vehicles driving economic activity. TfL statistics show us that underground usage is unbelievably low. In the West End, Oxford Circus is 81% down and Piccadilly Circus 87% down compared to the same time last year. In other areas of Westminster, on the periphery of the West End, these numbers are even worse.

The West End relies on customers and office workers using public transport, but confidence remains extremely low. Positive but pragmatic messaging on the safety and secureness of public transport will be paramount to encouraging tourists and locals to return. This should be allied with a shift in Government messaging around office working to give absolute clarity that people should be returning to work in central London. As part of this, Government



should consider how the message on social distancing within offices can be improved to boost numbers further.

To encourage the right type of journeys to be made on our streets, I suggest that the Government and the Mayor offer Congestion Zone exemptions for certain low pollution private vehicles being used by customers of businesses in key sectors e.g. theatres.

Theatres are a vital part of West End economy and a driver of spend in other sectors. For every £1 spent in West End box offices, £4 is spent in local restaurants, bars and the wider economy. I would also suggest consideration should be given to allow people wearing masks to sit next to one another in theatres as they do on planes or in other settings. As it stands, current social distancing guidelines mean it is not financially viable for many larger theatres to open which is a fundamental barrier for this important sector of the West End economy.

Another area action could be taken quickly in is for Government to swiftly deliver on the commitments made in the recent 'Gear Change' publication by DfT by introducing primary legislation to enable a local authority to impose a limit on the number of operators collecting commercial waste in its area. These are ideas Westminster City Council has worked closely with Government on over an extended period and now is the time to take simple, yet decisive action. Such a move would free up road space allowing councils to take a once in a generation decision about alternative modes of transport or road uses e.g. al fresco dining.

5) Business rates

The business rates system needs fundamental reform, but to protect our businesses in the short-term, I am asking Government to extend the business rate holiday beyond March 2021 to give businesses more time to plan for recovery. I also suggest that you consider temporarily lifting the rateable value cap for certain small retail, entertainment and hospitality businesses eligible for grants. The current threshold for grants has a limited impact in the West End, given the rateable value of most businesses in central London. This should be revised temporarily to allow grants to be targeted at small retail and hospitality businesses who may be struggling to survive with lower footfall.

6) Licensing

The Council is requesting flexibility as to when it will need to revise the existing local Statement of Licensing Policy so that we can make sure we are doing everything we can to support the recovery of bars, restaurants and venues. It's important to have the ability to develop supportive policies that are based on current trends and take account of lockdown in our evidence base in order to support the recovery of the local economy. If the Government were to grant this flexibility then then this would benefit not just the West End but also other major metropolitan areas, including Manchester and Birmingham who are facing a similar challenge.

Yours Sincerely,

Councillor Rachael Robathan, Leader of Westminster City Council