

THE FUTURE OF THE OXFORD STREET DISTRICT

About us

Heart of London Business Alliance represents over 600 businesses and property owners across the West End. Our purpose is to support the commercial well-being of our members and ensure their trading environment remains integral to London's offering as a place for people to visit, live, work and do business.

Overview

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the Place Strategy and Delivery Plan of the Oxford Street transformation. Heart of London recognises that these proposals will significantly enhance and transform the Oxford Street district. As the neighbouring Business Improvement District (BID), we understand that adjacent areas are dependent on each other's success and as such we are supportive of the proposals.

Heart of London welcomes the financial commitment from Westminster City Council (WCC) of £150 million. The investment in the public realm of the Oxford Street district is positive. However, investment cannot be focussed in just one area. Given the interdependence of the Oxford Street district with its neighbours, due consideration must be given to how we enhance those destinations. Public and private capital is needed across the West End to maintain and enhance the world-class offering.

Over recent months, we have been working to develop our own strategic principles as part of our long-term Area Strategy and we are excited to introduce this work more widely to the council early next year. We are keen to work with a wide range of statutory and non-statutory stakeholders in order to ensure a joined-up approach.

Comment on 12 key principles

Heart of London is supportive of all 12 principles included in the Place Strategy and Delivery Plan, and is committed to the notion that many of these principles should be expanded across the West End, where appropriate.

Principle 1 - Have easy access for all to a beautiful, safe, clean, well-managed and improved district. Inclusivity should be at the forefront of any proposal for change and we must encourage it. The council should be bold in its plans to cater for every visitor to the district, in particular those with disabilities and most in need.

Principle 2 - Support economic growth across the district and promote innovation and experimentation. In order to maintain and grow a world-class destination, it is essential to promote innovation and experimentation. The council must have the policy flexibility to ensure that the West End remains at the cutting edge of innovation, whether it be in planning or other key areas of policy.

Principle 3 - Design for flexibility. The council should cater for a wide-ranging number of events or activations that could take place on the public realm. This is essential in order to maximise an area's potential.

Principle 4 - Build from existing and connect the whole district. Connections are vitally important, and with the introduction of the Elizabeth Line it is key that the whole of the West End is better connected to accommodate the huge increase in visits.

Principle 5 - Prioritise pedestrians and value every space. Heart of London is very supportive of the prioritisation of pedestrians and asks that the council apply this principle to other areas of high footfall and visitor destinations.

Principle 6 - Make the district better for cycling. Whilst every effort should be made to make cycling safer and more manageable, the key priority must be pedestrians, and decreasing road traffic and congestion. By focusing on these issues, the cycling experience should improve. Heart of London recognises and supports zero-emission modes of transport.

Principle 7 - Create beautifully designed streets, gateways and a diversity of public spaces across the district. Punctuating the streetscape will be vital for improving legibility and creating 'moments' for users. This will enhance the experience of an area, and the council should apply this principle throughout the West End. The council should be mindful, however, that the use of high-quality materials for pavements and street furniture must be replaceable.

Principle 8 - Enrich the cultural life and identity of the district. In order to protect and enhance the unique history and character of the West End, this principle should be applied throughout and not just on Oxford Street.

Principle 9 - Take every opportunity to add additional trees and planting, creating new green spaces and revitalising the garden squares. The introduction of more greenery to the West End will not only enhance air quality, but soften the surroundings and make public space more attractive and comfortable. The principle should be applied where appropriate across the West End.

Principle 10 - Take immediate steps to address management. A robust management plan is the key to ensuring streets are maintained, clean, green and safe. A coordinated multi-stakeholder partnership approach should be taken throughout the West End.

Principle 11 – Improve safety. Safety should be a priority for all statutory bodies. The council should ensure that individuals are not only safe, but *feel* safe in a public space. The feeling of safety in the public realm improves one's experience and greatly enhances their perception of an area.

Principle 12 - Improve air quality and manage freight and servicing movements. Tackling air quality must be a priority of the council, given London's poor record on air pollution. Heart of London is extremely supportive of measures that will consolidate freight and waste and will support the council in tackling these issues.

Comment on issues and challenges

Implementation and management

One of the hallmarks of success for any transformational project is not simply how the public realm looks immediately after its renovation, but how it looks in five-to-ten years. Heart of London strongly supports and encourages a new public and private sector task force that would ensure the longevity of all major transformational projects or key strategic visitor destinations.

The task force would be holistic in its scope and would cover many operational issues from utilities to street cleansing and safety and security. This would be a blue print for how to implement and maintain major transformational projects.

Connectivity – road traffic

Heart of London backs the rationalisation of buses to maximise usage capacity, and supports, where possible, that there should be a reduction in the number of services. We recognise the need for a more efficient, reliable and accessible transport network, and that the current number, and duplication of, buses on the network contribute to traffic congestion and noise pollution. We are supportive of a reduction in bus services on Regent Street, providing this helps to reduce congestion at Piccadilly Circus.

More broadly, our members want to understand the effect on road traffic congestion in the Heart of London area as a result of changes in the Oxford Street district. We would ask that WCC undertakes the necessary work on traffic displacement to ensure no adverse effects on heavily congested roads in the Heart of London area, such as Piccadilly Circus, Charing Cross Road and Haymarket.

Connectivity – walking and cycling

We strongly agree with the principles of prioritising pedestrians and request that consideration be given to extending these principles to areas with high footfall volumes, such as ours. The introduction of the Elizabeth Line is estimated to bring an extra 60 million visits annually, which will increase footfall by 40% across the West End. Whilst we support better provision for cycling across the West End, the most immediate priority must be for pedestrians.

Decreased road traffic will make it more feasible to widen pavements and ease pedestrian congestion. Measures such as widening pavements and creating more rest, leisure and quiet spaces for people would improve the pedestrian experience for visitors, residents and workers. We ask that these principles be extended into the Heart of London area.

Enforcement

As traffic is redirected during the transformation and more people are encouraged to walk or cycle, the council should be mindful of dispersal. We ask that the council ensures there is the enforcement capacity to tackle the broad range of issues that dispersal may cause.

Waste and freight

Heart of London is a leading voice in this area and strongly supports proposals in the consultation to work with BIDs on waste and freight consolidation. We have introduced and promoted preferred supplier and waste and recycling initiatives, which last year reduced vehicle journeys by over 2,200 in our area. We would strongly support and encourage any proposals that bring forward a joined-up approach across the West End or wider area.

Street performance, street activity and pedicabs

Westminster council has made important initial steps in relation to the issues associated with street performance. Heart of London supports busking across the West End, however, in order to have a well-managed streetscape that caters for everybody, busking must be managed properly. As such, pilot schemes on Oxford Street, Leicester Square and Trafalgar Square must be introduced no later than summer 2019.

Street activity, however, is not limited to street performance and entertainment. Across Westminster there are a number of different street activities ranging from portrait artists, to religious preachers to political activists and pamphleteers. The council rightly has a duty to protect freedom of speech. WCC, however, should be mindful of how it protects freedom of expression, whilst balancing out the need for well-managed streets.

Pedicabs continue to cause nuisance on pavements and pathways. More lobbying of central government must be done in order to properly regulate and tackle the behaviours currently associated with some pedicabs drivers. Any strategy to properly manage the area cannot be complete while pedicabs remain unregulated.

Culture strategy

The creation of a comprehensive culture strategy is key to maintaining and enhancing an area's identity. We welcome proposals in the consultation to develop one in relation to the Oxford Street district, but are strongly committed to the idea that this should be replicated in Leicester Square & Piccadilly Circus, and Piccadilly & St James's in order to showcase the respective heritage and characters of these adjoining areas.

Moreover, the culture strategy can be used to enhance the evening and night-time experience, ensuring uses of the public realm at night are appropriate to the character of an area.

Planning and licensing

Where possible, the council should seek the removal of street clutter. We support this policy in the consultation as reducing clutter is part of enhancing contrast, which improves the legibility of the streetscape.

Heart of London supports flexibility in planning and as such, advocates the council's intent for flexibility in these proposals in order to create and accommodate projected economic growth and employment. However, we would caution that measures around on-site affordable accommodation in the City Plan may have unintended consequences. The West End faces unique challenges, which should be recognised in the planning system.

Moreover, licencing regulations must also be flexible enough to support the economy, particularly during the evening and night-time. As licenced premises become better managed, there will be more scope for growth in the evening and night-time economy, and regulations should be in place that enhance and support these activities not just in the Oxford Street district, but across the West End.

As part of a pan-London campaign this winter, Westminster City Council supports 'Tap London' - the contactless giving initiative in partnership with the Mayor's office, Heart of London and a number of other stakeholders that seeks to raise money to help tackle homelessness and rough sleeping. We ask that the council supports the use of tap units in the Oxford Street district and West End moreover in order to encourage a wider roll-out of the scheme.

Conclusion

Heart of London welcomes the opportunity to comment on the consultation and principles of the transformation of the Oxford Street district. Neighbouring districts across the West End are inextricably linked, and therefore success in the future is dependent on one another. It is important that plans to transform the Oxford Street district are complemented by strategies that ensure surrounding areas are not left behind.

As the neighbouring Business Improvement District representing 600 businesses and property owners, we are fully supportive of these plans providing our comments above are fully considered and concerns addressed.