

Cllr Rachael Robathan
Leader, Westminster City Council
64 Victoria St
Westminster
London SW1E 6QP

13 August 2021

By email only

Dear Rachael,

Re: Al fresco hospitality

Throughout the pandemic there have been a number of very positive initiatives led by Westminster City Council which are helping to support the area's economic recovery. We believe the City Council and WPA - along with the wider private sector - has worked well together to support the city during an extremely challenging period.

The single most effective driver of economic and social recovery has undoubtedly been the expansion of al fresco hospitality. It has helped draw visitors back to the West End, whilst creating additional amenity space for residents, saved businesses from collapse, and supported many of the area's 80,000 hospitality jobs. Its role in helping to keep more businesses viable through an incredibly difficult period and providing employment prospects for local residents and Londoners is widely acknowledged.

We appreciate that there are some locations where the relaxation of licensing to enable al fresco hospitality has created local challenges which need further work to resolve. We welcome the ongoing consultations to address these issues and help find more permanent solutions.

You have been rightly proud of the fact that Westminster's al fresco scheme has provided an additional 16,000 outside covers during its operation, and al fresco streets have been a joy to wander through and explore, particularly with reduced traffic and cleaner air. The impact of outdoor seating has provided a glimpse into a more welcoming, open city: the benefits of which have filtered into the wider West End.

However, visitor numbers are still only c50% pre pandemic levels and businesses need as much support as possible to survive. When the City Council first set the date for the termination of al fresco on 30 September, it was on the assumption that national Covid-19 restrictions would have been lifted on 21 June. Given that this ended up being postponed until 19 July, there is a compelling case to be made for the City Council to **extend its own scheme by four weeks** as a short-term measure to help businesses, safeguard jobs and support the return to more normal working patterns on which Central London's economy depends.

Al fresco has a key role to play in supporting the return of workers to offices, who are more likely to embrace the workplace if it is located close to where they can enjoy meeting friends outdoors. This would be a virtuous circle, as across the CAZ every 100 office workers helps support 18 jobs in retail, hospitality, leisure and culture.

A four-week extension would enable the maximisation of trade for many schemes across the West End - whilst the weather allows - - which landowners and businesses have significantly invested in. Critically, it also allows more time for responsible landowners to work with Westminster City Council to bring forward well managed, longer term al fresco solutions which support the council's ambitious vision for the West End. This would help lead to more permanent solutions for the area's economic and social recovery and its long-term success.

We fully appreciate the sensitivity of some isolated issues and agree that by far the best approach is to secure widespread community support. The current al fresco arrangement was understandably introduced at speed. Clearly some improvements can, and should, be made around the management and appearance of certain outdoor dining spots, particularly if they are to be longer-term schemes for the West End.

However, longer term pragmatism and compromise must take precedent as we adapt for future ways of working and leisure, and we urge you to listen to a wide range of views on this issue. Consumer tastes are changing rapidly, and the adoption of al fresco has helped transform the West End during the pandemic. It is something visitors will expect if they are to return here on a regular basis. A recent poll for YouGov showed that 43% of diners would prefer to sit outside “even if the weather was not great”, compared to just 27% who would want to sit indoors.

There is much to be positive about a Continental approach to F&B, including a reduction in so-called ‘vertical drinking’, as well as the anti-social behaviour and disturbance associated with binge drinking and crowded venues. Improved air quality and more open, pleasant places are also welcome by-products. For these reasons, other areas of Central London have embraced al fresco for the long-term – including the City of London Corporation which has extended al fresco until September 2022, and the London Borough of Camden which is supporting the expansion of its popular ‘Streateries’.

On the international stage, where London – and particularly the West End - competes against other world cities, there are plans to make al fresco permanent. New York City and Paris are both planning to regularise al fresco provision on an ongoing basis.

A positive approach to the benefits of al fresco hospitality will help secure Westminster’s ongoing appeal to the million people who once visited it daily, along with the 30 million annual tourists who we hope will one day return. It will also deliver tangible benefits for local residents, such as cleaner air and employment opportunities.

The WPA, along with our partner organisations and key stakeholders, look forward to working with you on this and other issues.

Yours sincerely,



Paul Williams

WPA Chair/Chief Executive, Derwent London

Charles Begley

Executive Director, London Property Alliance

Brian Bickell

Chief Executive, Shaftesbury

Kay Buxton

Chief Executive, Marble Arch London BID and Paddington Now

Ruth Duston OBE

Chief Executive, Victoria and Northbank BIDs

John James

Managing Director, Soho Estates

Peter Lawson

Chairman, Soho Business Alliance

Michelle McGrath

Executive Director, Capco

Ros Morgan

Chief Executive, Heart of London Business Alliance

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Chief Executive, UK Hospitality

James Raynor

Chief Executive, Grosvenor Britain & Ireland

Jace Tyrrell

Chief Executive, New West End Company

Cc:

Cllr Matthew Green, Cabinet Member for Business, Licensing & Planning

Stuart Love, Chief Executive

Debbie Jackson, Executive Director, Growth, Planning & Housing