

MAYOR OF LONDON

Night Surgery Lambeth





Night Surgery: Lambeth

London's Night Czar Amy Lamé visited the London Borough of Lambeth for a night surgery in September 2022. The evening included a roundtable discussion, a walk around Brixton town centre and a visit to Venn Street in Clapham.

On 22 September, I was delighted to visit Lambeth for a roundtable discussion with councillors and officers about holistic planning for the borough at night. We visited Brixton town centre, famous for its vibrant and internationally recognised night time culture and music scenes, before heading to Venn Street in Clapham to see a fantastic example of night time placemaking.

Lambeth Town Hall

We began the night surgery at Lambeth Town Hall, where I chaired a roundtable discussion with officers from across the council, representatives from Brixton BID, and the council's Night Time Borough Champion, Cllr Jacqui Dyer. We discussed the biggest challenges and opportunities facing the borough and its communities at night and invited those present to air their concerns, good news stories and aspirations.

We heard that Brixton is the second largest centre for night time culture and entertainment in the country, after Soho, and partners around the table expressed their desire to protect, support and celebrate Brixton's particular ecosystem of night time uses. It was encouraging to hear licensing officers describe a shift in their approach from regulators to facilitators, supporting businesses to operate successfully.

We heard how businesses in Brixton have sought to diversify to become part of the local night life. San Marino's café on Brixton Station Road now serves cocktails in the evening. The council explained that they were developing place-specific approaches to licensing and regulation, recognising that Brixton is home to a diverse business community requiring a bespoke approach to ensure its character is protected and growth is inclusive.

The cost of living crisis is threatening the future of night time businesses and it was suggested that support programmes should reflect the disproportionate impact on venues open after dark. Businesses are responding to rising costs by reducing their trading hours, cutting shifts and trying to reduce energy costs. I heard that Brixton Village operators will struggle to heat the market hall over winter, despite recently upgrading their heating system.

One of the challenges faced by businesses, high streets and town centres across London is the growing residential population in commercial and night time centres. This can be exacerbated by the extension of permitted development rights, which allow changes of use without having to secure additional planning permission. Officers described the efforts needed to secure Article 4 directives (which can override permitted development rights in strategic locations) where the council wants to retain the ability to plan land uses and manage residential growth where it could impact night time venues.

The conversation then turned to the needs of night workers and inequity in their pay and access to amenities. Lambeth is home to two hospitals, the borough's largest employers with 44,000 employees between them, many of whom work night shifts.

I was glad to hear that both are London Living Wage accredited. The council would like to create a detailed picture of the borough's night time workforce to be able to support them better, for example through better transport planning. This is particularly desirable in the south of the borough, which is not as well connected as the north. It would also allow the council to work with night time employers to secure good work standards and plan their skills and training programmes to support good work at night.

The way the council responded to Covid-19 provides a blueprint for closer cross-departmental working. Officers highlighted the value of pooling data resources and developing a clear, shared picture of the borough's economy to allow coordinated, effective communication with businesses.

The council wants to work with the Brixton BID and cultural institutions to develop shared marketing and promotions for Brixton. We heard about a tangible shift in the demographic profile of people out in Brixton at night compared to the day. The council expressed the importance of not alienating residents and ensuring the area remains vibrant, inclusive, accessible and affordable by day and night. The council increasingly recognises that night time isn't just about businesses and the economy, but is critical for broader cultural and community wellbeing.

We concluded the roundtable by discussing how a night time strategy could address the challenges and opportunities raised. The council wants to adopt a holistic and strategic approach to night time in Lambeth, integrating work already underway on developing skills and employment. It was great to hear officers and councillors reflect on the relationship between planning, economic and licensing policies and we discussed how the 'night test' could help ensure policies complement and reinforce shared objectives for night time. The 'night test' would see the council review decisions and policies through a 'night time lens', assessing what the implications of any intervention are for the borough and its communities at night. This was seen as an effective tool to help embed night time thinking in policy-making.

Windrush Square and Brixton House

Following the roundtable, we headed to Windrush Square, which is overlooked by the Black Cultural Archives (BCA), one of the borough's key institutions. The council explained plans to extend BCA's evening and night time activities and we heard about Brixton BID's brilliant new 'Brixton x Harlem' project. Brixton is now twinned with Harlem, reinforcing both neighbourhoods' international significance for communities of colour and social justice movements.

We walked up Coldharbour Lane, where a barber was practising his skills on a street corner, before arriving at Brixton House. The theatre recently opened as part of a wider mixed-use development and is part of Brixton's Creative Enterprise Zone. The venue embodies the ambitions of the Creative Enterprise Zone, forming a local arts hub and offering affordable studio and rehearsal spaces. The venue is gearing up for a busy season and looking to extend its opening hours to 11pm from Mondays to Saturdays and 6pm on Sundays.



Windrush Square



Night Czar Amy Lamé and Lambeth's Night Time Borough Champion, Jacqui Dyer, speaking to the manager of Brixton House

Electric Avenue

Electric Avenue has benefitted from Mayor of London 'Good Growth' funded public realm improvements and the street was busy with punters and market traders packing up. The neon-style 'Electric Avenue' sign has become a local landmark that is visible from the station day and night and facade refurbishments enhance the sweeping curve of the street's architecture. New paving unifies the pedestrian space but has altered the acoustics of the street, creating some issues with noise. This served as a good reminder that implementing the 'night test' can also help ensure design and material choices support evening and night time uses.



Illuminated signage above Electric Avenue



Brightly lit shopfronts and street cleaning on Electric Avenue

Morleys

Morleys department store on Brixton Road is the oldest of six Morleys in south London. The cost of living crisis is impacting trade, but hourly data shows spend to be typically higher in the store during the evenings than early mornings. The store has compressed its opening hours from 8am-8:30pm before the pandemic to 10am-7:30pm, skewing its opening hours towards more lucrative evening trade. The store manager explained that they would ideally like to stay open later, but staffing was a barrier to this despite most employees living locally.

The store regularly hosts BID meetings and recently hosted pop-up retail spaces for local makers. They also benefit from close working with the Metropolitan Police and wider business community in Brixton and I can't wait to see the refurbished store when it reopens on 11 November.



Brixton Road looking north



Night Czar Amy Lamé and a council officer for business and inward investment speaking to the manager of the Morleys department store

Brixton Station Road

Our final stop in Brixton was Brixton Station Road. We stopped outside Pop Brixton, a meanwhile use pop-up for food, drink and socialising, constructed from shipping containers. The street itself hosts a street market, the management of which has recently been taken on by the council.

One side of the street comprises 16 railway arches, ten of which are currently vacant. The council is exploring ways to attract meanwhile tenants while supporting the long-term leasing of the arches, owned by Arch Co. As Pop Brixton begins to be dismantled to make way for development, the council is keen to see some of the businesses occupy the nearby arches. Across London and further afield, sites like this are becoming a key component of the regeneration of an area and are often suitable for creating clusters of night time uses, thanks to their setting beneath noise-generating railways and the intimate scale of their architecture.

We also discussed barriers to upgrading public lighting where long-term management and maintenance contracts are in place and limit the flexibility and scope to rethink and redesign existing schemes. We heard aspirations to replace existing glary and utilitarian floodlighting with warmer lighting that enhances the street's architecture and function as a social space.



Koi Ramen Bar in an archway on Brixton Station Road



Pop Brixton

Venn Street

Our final stop on the night surgery was Venn Street in Clapham, the site of an innovative licensing and management initiative in public realm design.

The street used to attract anti-social behaviour before a public realm improvement project in 2011 helped bring activity and a sense of community custodianship to the street. New paving improved the street's flexibility in use and created clear zones for pedestrian movement, parking and outdoor seating. Built-in power supplies also support weekly markets during pedestrian-only periods.

Another initiative helped to streamline outdoor trading on the street. Where previously each business's operating hours were managed according to individual premises licences, the council proposed managing the street under a single operator licence. This saw a single agreement drawn up for the layout of outdoor seating and dining and allows businesses to take ownership of the street's management, encouraging them to work together closely.

I spoke to the owner of Venn Street Records, who spoke highly of the close working relationship with the council and other businesses on the street. He appreciated the open-mindedness, trust and flexibility shown by the council and their supportive, business-friendly and place-specific approach to licensing.

I was so impressed with the scheme, which demonstrates the potential for licensing and regeneration teams to work together to improve the vibrancy of a street at night. The mood on the street was a real delight, with low level, warm ambient lighting and olive trees decorated with fairy lights enhancing the atmosphere of an outdoor dining and social space.



Venn Street



Night Czar Amy Lamé with Cllr Jacqui Dyer, Lambeth's Head of Regulatory Services, Trevor Virtue, and the owner of Venn Street Records outside his venue



Final thoughts

My visit to Brixton and Clapham highlighted the importance of taking the holistic approach to night time planning that we advocate at City Hall. Every council department plays their role in shaping their areas at night, directly or indirectly. Working together on a night time strategy and implementing the 'night test' are important tools in protecting existing night time communities and infrastructures, while growing a sustainable ecosystem of uses that serves local residents, workers and visitors over 24 hours.

It was brilliant to see first-hand how nuanced, place-specific approaches to policy can create great night time places and a strong sense of community. My discussions with officers and councillors highlighted the benefits of better understanding the variety and complexity of activities that shape places at night and I look forward to supporting them in their ongoing research, strategies and projects across the borough at night.

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