

Rt Hon Angela Rayner
Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary
of State for Housing, Communities
and Local Government

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Sadiq Khan
Mayor of London

COUNCILLOR ADAM HUG
Leader of the Council
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BY EMAIL ONLY

Wednesday 18 September 2024

Dear Angela and Sadiq

Oxford Street is vital to Westminster's and London's economy. The retail sector faces huge challenges, and it is imperative that we can all work with retailers, landowners and shoppers to set a positive framework for the future. We want to see thriving businesses, busy shops, well-paid staff, and satisfied shoppers from home and abroad. We also want to see Oxford Street diversify its offer through leisure, arts and hospitality uses which will attract a wider mix of people to Oxford Street. As a Council we have been working to find new ways to ensure residents from across Westminster, particularly from its poorest communities, can benefit from the economic powerhouse at its heart. However, as Councillors representing the West End and the rest of Westminster, we know and understand the pressures that Oxford Street can put on the surrounding diverse communities in Soho, Fitzrovia, Mayfair and Marylebone. It is our role to ensure their concerns are heard and addressed by the Mayor and Government, whilst meeting the needs of wider Westminster, London, and the UK as a whole.

We have led the transformation of the street - cracking down on candy shops, supporting new brands to take vacant space with the Meanwhile: On Oxford Street programme, flexing planning policy to welcome new uses such as the MOCA art museum and welcoming new and returning retail brands including HMV, Ikea, Miniso and Waterstones. Any debate about Oxford Street's future must recognise this real progress and the longstanding and enduring role of the City Council as both place maker and custodian of the West End.

Enabling works for our £90m Oxford Street Programme are already underway on streets around the area. Work was planned to start on Oxford Street itself in Spring 2025 and to have been jointly funded by the Council and private sector, working constructively with TfL to deliver it. Our approach was backed by a rigorous business case, extensive public engagement, stakeholder relationship building, traffic plans and preparatory construction surveys; information which should be considered as part of the preparation for any future works. The world has been waiting for change to come to Oxford Street, which was why we were moving with such pace and focus in one of the most complex urban ecosystems in the world.

Given your recent announcement and in the spirit of moving forward in a constructive manner to achieve the right outcome for the future of the West End we have a number of questions that must be addressed as soon as possible. I have set out below ten initial questions, the answers to which may assist in alleviating some of the concerns of the residents, businesses, and the Council. We have also put forward some potential solutions to these challenges.

1. How can a fully pedestrianised scheme be delivered in a way that does not lead to significantly increased traffic congestion in the nearby, narrow residential streets or worsen air quality by displacing buses and taxis?

This will require concerted action to reduce the amount of servicing and delivery movements across the West End by delivering substantial freight and waste consolidation schemes and supporting the use of micro mobility schemes for last mile delivery. Further action must be taken to address the impact of servicing on the wider community, as Westminster has been doing through its scheme that has enabled loading to take place at night on the street itself rather than impacting nearby communities.

If pedestrianisation proceeds, careful thought must be given to ensuring the redesign of the bus routes to reduce the impact on the local network, whilst retaining access for those who need buses most. Further steps will need to be taken to reduce rat running through residential areas, learning from the scheme in Fitzrovia that is part of Westminster's existing Oxford Street project. If the Mayor and Government are committed to the full pedestrianisation of the 1.9km street, including further works going into Camden, this will require a wholesale rethink of transportation in and around the West End, backed by the delivery capacity to match, as further discussed below, to minimise impact and efficiently implement any new scheme.

2. What is the size of the MDA, the purpose of the MDC and are either of them necessary?

At this stage Westminster City Council is far from convinced that the creation of a Mayoral Development Area (MDA) and Mayoral Development Corporation (MDC) is necessary to deliver the Mayor's stated aims (particularly given that highways powers to take over the road sit outside the MDA/MDC process). Any eventual MDA and MDC needs to recognise that footfall and uses have evolved and the geography of the street has changed significantly since 2017, with further traffic changes, the opening of Crossrail and the associated new commercial investment and pressures. If such an MDA/MDC approach is brought in any eventual redline for any MDA must only include the areas of highway and public realm necessary to deliver any transportation and public realm schemes (not including the buildings themselves). The expansion of planning powers (either geographically or in the scope of responsibilities) beyond those necessary to deliver any street transformation scheme would be a clear barrier to pragmatic engagement between us and would be firmly resisted by the City Council.

3. How will you engage with local residents on your plans for the scheme and ensure local representation and the protection of resident's voice moving forward?

We believe that if an MDC is created then Westminster should be represented on its main board in a manner proportionate to the land area contained within the MDA and should have equivalent representation at lower-level committees. One of the elements that had helped end years of delay in previous WCC plans for Oxford Street was our establishment of active resident involvement structures to work through potential problems and come up with solutions that were mutually beneficial. It is imperative that this approach is taken forward by any new body, both through its formal structures and its proactive engagement with the community and other stakeholders. There needs to be a clear plan of engagement from the GLA with residents who are concerned about potential impacts and that must commence with urgency.

4. How will you minimise the impact on residents and businesses during transformation of the street?

We will need reassurance that the construction should be delivered with the same level of care and attention to minimise avoidable disruption to local residents as Westminster's original plans, recognising that residents from all backgrounds (including social housing) live close to Oxford Street. In any construction plan, serious thought needs to be given to how to protect Oxford Street's vital Christmas trade and thousands of retail jobs be safeguarded as it had been in Westminster's own plans. The three months period before Christmas is the key trading period for retailers so tills need to be kept ringing whilst the scheme is delivered. The area around Oxford Street is already a high activity zone with a number of building developments underway so careful consideration will need to be given to the other works taking place in this area and the interface with any new scheme.

5. How will a pedestrianised space be designed and managed to protect the public?

A pedestrianised scheme poses a different set of challenges for hostile vehicle mitigation (HVM) than one that retains traffic, in order to keep shoppers safe from terrorism. As the north/south traffic routes will remain open, we will need to see high quality HVM plans in place, given the potential for increased speed posed by a large pedestrian area if the perimeter is breached.

Once open, a fully pedestrianised space is substantially more challenging to secure and manage, particularly at night, than one that retains some level of traffic. It will be essential to see a comprehensive management plan before the street is created. We will need a clear commitment in terms of increased police presence, without diverting resources from elsewhere in Westminster or the BCU, and other appropriate security measures to prevent new late-night disorder and tackle the scourge of shoplifting and robbery that pose a major challenge for shops and shoppers at present.

6. How can any new scheme protect access for older people, people with disabilities and families with young children?

Westminster's existing plans found ways to transform the public realm whilst enabling these shoppers with mobility challenges to use the whole of the street by retaining bus and taxi access. There are a number of measures that may help here. Firstly, it will be important to deliver step free access to Tottenham Court Road, Oxford Circus, Bond Street and Marble Arch stations, whilst also looking at other interventions across the network that currently mean many people with mobility issues need to use buses over tubes. The new scheme could look at Westminster's previous proposals of placing more taxi ranks directly adjacent to, but not on, Oxford Street. The new project should explore the feasibility of new and innovative mobility schemes to enable the elderly, disabled or a family with small children and bags of shopping to visit shops along the street.

7. What opportunities does Mayoral and Government funding provide to do something new beyond pedestrianisation?

Increased investment from the Mayor and Government provides opportunities to unlock potentially transformative schemes beyond the Mayor's pedestrianisation proposals that would have otherwise been unaffordable. As the Mayor knows, we believe serious consideration should be given to the Marble Arch Regeneration scheme to change the layout of the inner ring road and open up more public space around Park Lane.

8. What can be done to make cycling work better in and around Oxford Street?

Westminster Council's original plans included retaining cycling access down Oxford Street, while it was separately consulting on cycling changes to the north of the street. The new Mayoral plans seem to suggest cycling East-West will not be allowed down a pedestrianised street, meaning alternative measures will be put in place in the wider area. As set out above increased cargo bike use for last mile deliveries will need be part of any future for the area and will need to be effectively managed. We seek to work pragmatically to enhance cycling opportunities in the area whilst recognising the further challenges pedestrianisation might bring for local transport networks.

9. How will the Council be compensated for its previous investment?

As set out above the Council has been working at pace, since the election of its new administration in May 2022, to end years of delay and create a deliverable and transformative scheme for the area. This has involved significant capital and staff time investment by the local council to deliver in the national interest. If our scheme does not proceed, as now seems likely, it will be important to ensure that our costs are recouped so that they can be reinvested to the benefit of local residents. The New West End Company had already invested £1.5m of their own funding into the delivery of our existing schemes and we suggest that similar discussions are held with them over appropriate recompense.

10. What happens when the work is done?

Clarity must be given on the long-term future of the street and the surrounding area. If it is the intention for the post-completion scheme to be returned to Westminster's control consideration will be needed around the increased maintenance costs posed by a fully pedestrianised scheme. Either way we would hope to see strong collaboration and coordination with Westminster's street cleaning and refuse collection services to avoid unnecessary vehicle movements and to avoid undermining any contractual arrangements we have.

We are asking for initial answers to these important questions as soon as possible from the GLA and Government to give the Council, its residents, and other stakeholders confidence in what might lie ahead and give the reassurances that would underpin the relationship between the City Council, the Mayor, and Government over Oxford Street's future. It is acknowledged that the level of detail required to fully resolve them is likely to emerge over the coming months. As with any major scheme, the list of questions and potential challenges stretches beyond what could be reasonably outlined here and will need to be teased out in any further discussions. It is however important to ensure that they are satisfactorily answered before any new arrangements are put in place.

Though our initial visions for the future of the street may differ, I know we share a commitment to making sure the nation's high street has a bright future, one that brings benefits locally, regionally, and nationally.

Yours sincerely



Councillor Adam Hug
Leader of Westminster Council

Copied to:

Rt Hon Louise Haigh, Secretary of State for Transport

Jim McMahon MP, Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution

Richard Watts, Deputy Chief of Staff to the Mayor of London