

MAYOR OF LONDON

Night Surgery Woolwich





Night Surgery: Woolwich

In September 2023, London's Night Czar Amy Lamé conducted a night surgery in Woolwich. She attended a Night Time Enterprise Zone (NTEZ) funded Woolwich Lates event – the Hi! Street Fest Finale – delivered by Historic England and Greenwich-based company, Emergency Exit Arts. The event attracted over 1,000 people and brought giant mechanical puppets, music, dance and costumes to the high street. The Night Czar met local councillors, officers, NTEZ partners and businesses to hear about the impacts of the NTEZ programme, which had been running since the start of 2023.

Arrival by boat

I began the night surgery by taking a Thames Clipper from Bankside Pier to Woolwich Arsenal, enjoying spectacular views along the Thames at dusk. I heard from NTEZ partners - Uber Boats and Visit Greenwich – about the impacts of Woolwich's NTEZ and their roles in marketing it. A promotional video for Woolwich Lates was playing across the boat's monitors, as it had been for the past three months, immediately demonstrating some of the collaborative work that has gone into the NTEZ and its promotion.

The Woolwich Lates brand has been established to market the town centre as an evening destination. It is part of a wider effort to encourage repeat visits and increased dwell time in the borough. Visit Greenwich has developed a marketing toolkit, including a suite of branded assets and images that partners can use on their websites. Creating consistent messaging, a clear brand and a dedicated webpage on the Visit Greenwich website has helped attract over 1,000 visits to the Woolwich Lates page and created 34,000 impressions online.

The NTEZ has brought together stakeholders and programme delivery partners more formally to discuss their vision and priorities for Woolwich town centre at night. Local arts organisations, such as Woolwich Works and the Tramshed, have been key to delivering post-6pm events, alongside developers and landowners. The strengthening of these partnerships has been particularly important in an area where no formal business partnership existed previously. These partnerships and the Woolwich Lates brand are a legacy of the NTEZ that will help further evening and night time placemaking initiatives.

Woolwich Works

Our first stop was Woolwich Works, where I met councillors and the venue's new management team, who oversee its six performance and event spaces. They want to activate the venue more throughout the day, with overlapping audiences and programmes of activity extending into the evening and night. They are establishing themselves as a local music hub and anchor for culture and community-led placemaking at the Royal Arsenal site.

The café/bar has extended its opening hours and added a small stage that hosts a regular programme of live music and family-friendly events from 8am to 11pm. They aim to promote local musicians, offering opportunities to perform first gigs at the bar. So far, they have seen a huge demand.

The venue's programme is varied, with music, comedy, spoken word, poetry and dance performances offered alongside arts and crafts workshops. After a review of their ticket prices, they have also adjusted their programme to include more free events to ensure the venue is accessible to all.

I heard about some of the challenges of establishing a new venue, particularly one located in a newly regenerated residential neighbourhood. The venue closely monitors and controls sound levels and the outdoor courtyard, which hosts a summer beach bar among other events, has a 9:30pm curfew. The team explained that upgrading the historic building's glazing would help with soundproofing, but it is not currently affordable.

Berkeley Homes, the developer for the area, spoke about the engagement strategies they are developing to help integrate the surrounding residential neighbourhood with the wider town centre. The A206 creates a barrier between the two areas of Woolwich. NTEZ events have been programmed to help attract residents from the town centre to the Royal Arsenal site, and vice versa. I was heartened to hear that the NTEZ was starting to help knit the neighbourhoods together and provide a platform for further integration. It highlighted the potential of evening and night time social and cultural activities in strengthening a sense of community and belonging.

Berkeley Homes ran evening and night time events over the summer, including the Royal Arsenal Community Festival on Riverside Square, which attracted 4,500 visitors. The event ran until 10:30pm and included a talent show, market and workshops with Woolwich Works' resident arts companies. Berkeley Homes has also been running a pop-up, silent, open-air cinema until 10:30pm during the summer months, with priority tickets offered to residents via housing providers.



The director of Woolwich Works talks to NTEZ partners about the venue's aspirations



Food and drinks trucks helped activate the route from Woolwich Works to the town centre

Beresford Square

Crossing the A206, I visited Beresford Square to hear about the council's plans for its re-design, which will include new shopfronts. The proposals, funded by the Future High Street Fund, will also revitalise Woolwich market. I was excited to see the proposals visualised at night as well as during the day. The public realm improvements will include a new garden, terraced seating, lighting and an interactive water fountain. The gatehouse will be reopened and relit to create a new entrance to the square that is visible and welcoming after dark. I was also shown the site of a new leisure centre being developed and heard about a new cinema opening soon, both of which will diversify the town centre's mix of evening and night time activities.



Officers share night-time visualisations of Beresford Square's new lighting and public realm improvements



Public realm improvements underway in Woolwich town centre

Hi! Street Fest Reception and Coffee Lounge

I was delighted to attend a reception at the Tramshed to celebrate the final Hi! Street Fest event in Woolwich - part of a nationwide series of high street parties and carnivals funded by Historic England through their Heritage Action Zone programme. The events have been produced by Woolwich-based Emergency Exit Arts and co-created with local people.

Hi! Street Fest was made possible with the help of 2,000 volunteers from 129 organisations. 'Farrah the Fox', a giant puppet, has travelled across the country and been greeted by giant locally-inspired host puppets in Lowestoft, Gloucester, Wigan, Gosport, Middlesbrough, Stalybridge and Greenwich. This evening would see the programme's finale light up Woolwich.

Before the event started, I headed to the Coffee Lounge, a café on the corner of General Gordon Square. The square has been the focal point for many of Woolwich's NTEZ activities. I spoke to the owner about his experience of trading on the square and the impact of NTEZ events on his business. The café had recently successfully applied for a licence and started opening later, serving pizzas and drinks. Events had helped create a destination and attract people to the town centre in the evening.

The local Business Crime Reduction Partnership manager for the town centre joined us to tell us about her team's work to ensure the town centre is safe at night. Safer Business Network was appointed in March to manage the partnership and I was encouraged to hear that the Mayor's Women's Night Safety Charter was a key area of focus. To date, 77 of the area's 350 businesses have signed up. The partnership has been working to safeguard evening and night time events, provide Welfare and Vulnerability Engagement (WAVE) training and set up safe hubs and a Pubwatch scheme. They emphasise engagement before enforcement and are working closely with the Met Police and local authority community safety officers to build trust and confidence that any issues reported will be followed up.



The Night Czar addresses attendees at the Hll Street Fest reception alongside a giant puppet



Discussions at the Coffee Lounge

General Gordon Square

We then headed into the square to grab some street food and watch the final procession of the Hi! Street Fest. I spoke to Night Hosts managing the Lates events and was happy to hear that Volunteer Centre Greenwich wants to maintain the hosts in the town centre as a legacy of the NTEZ programme.

The parade was brilliantly choreographed and brought a real carnival atmosphere to the town centre. Lanterns, music, dancing, puppets, confetti and sparklers captivated over 1,000 people of all ages. NTEZ events have, on average, attracted a 23% increase in footfall to the town centre.



The finale of Hi! Street Fest

Powis Street

Many of the events in the town centre have sought to drive footfall and extend activities into Powis Street. Participating businesses have displayed Woolwich Lates branding and some have offered discounted products and services to coincide with the events. The street is the starting point for the new Woolwich Culture Trail, with many of the shopfronts displaying newly commissioned portraits of local people.

Woolwich Front Room

First, I visited Woolwich Front Room, a new community space managed by the Greenwich Co-operative Development Agency and funded by Historic England's High Streets Heritage Action Zone and the council. The venue has a focus on small-scale community engagement and can be used for meetings, events and workshops. It has been extending community events and activities later into the evening as part of Woolwich Lates and it was busy during my visit. The space provides a social, affordable and welcoming venue on the high street.

Woolwich Indoor Market

My next stop was the Woolwich Indoor Market at the western end of Powis Street, which has higher levels of vacant premises. The market occupies a formerly vacant retail unit and provides a range of small and affordable spaces for start-up businesses.

I spoke to the owners of three restaurants; Hitachi Sushi, Duck Duck Pork and Mary's Takeaway, which had opened just last week and sold Ghanaian food. Council officers were offering a programme of business, communications and marketing support for start-ups and it was great to hear that the owner of the sushi restaurant was looking to expand into a larger unit in the town centre. The businesses were very supportive of the Woolwich Lates programme, but felt that concerns around safety were the main barrier to establishing night time activity in the town centre.

@VR

My final stop of the evening was a new virtual reality (VR) gaming arcade. Featuring VR cars, motorbikes, rollercoasters and treadmills, the venue offers a wide range of games and experiences. I was delighted to take a VR rollercoaster ride with local councillors to try out the new high street leisure experience, which is open from 3pm to 10pm.



Restaurant owners at Woolwich indoor market



VR experience with local councillors

Final Thoughts

It was wonderful to revisit Woolwich after my previous night surgery in March 2022 and see the progress that is being made to revitalise the town centre. The strength of new partnerships that have been fostered through the NTEZ programme really shone through and I can't wait to visit again when public realm and lighting improvements are in place. The town centre is undergoing a period of rapid change, with the arrival of the Elizabeth line and new large-scale investments in public realm, cultural and social infrastructure. It was great to see how evening and night time events and activities were being used to help draw together different parts of the town centre and how venues like Woolwich Works, Tramshed and General Gordon Square were forming centres for community-led activity, festivity and entrepreneurship.



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