

Sir Sadiq Khan
Mayor of London

Copy to Thomas Turrell
GLA member for Bexley and Bromley.

2nd January 2025

Dear Sir,

Despite being 75 years old, I was very pleased to be invited to a New Year's Eve party in Shaftesbury Avenue. I arranged to travel up from Orpington to Charing Cross by train on the 20.38, returning on the 22.45, well before the fireworks and late-night drunks. I had promised my husband that I should be back home in time to see the New Year in with him.

As I left Charing Cross Station shortly after 9pm, the street exit was barricaded, manned by a row of crowd controllers (CCs) in high-viz jackets. I asked one of these people whether I should be OK to get the train home to Orpington at 22.45, and he said I should be fine.

Reassured, I walked up to the party, had one small glass of wine, stayed one hour and set off back to Charing Cross Station at 10.25pm. When I got back to the station at about 10.37, I was not allowed in at the front but told by CCs that I must go along the Strand to Cafe Nero and turn right, right again and come into the station from below. I said there wasn't time for me to do that at the train was at 10.45. They suggested that I could do it if I ran. They had the grace to laugh a little at their suggestion.

I walked to Villiers Street, passing two or three more small groups of CCs who directed me and other people trying to go home to keep walking. We were told each time that Villiers Street was the only way to get into the station.

When I reached Villiers Street, I had already missed my train but expected there would be another one in due course, so I might still just get home by midnight. There was a barrier across the street manned by more CCs and a dense small crowd including parents with small children in buggies, and a few elderly people like me. Only people coming *up* Villiers Street were being allowed through the barrier. Lots of people were getting tired and cross, and we were then told that the whole station was closing at 11pm so there was no point in staying.

I walked back to Charing Cross Station, expecting to find some information about how to get home. Each time I passed a group of CCs, I told them that Villiers Street was closed, so there was no point in sending people down there. They said they had no radio and had not been informed of the closure, so continued to send people along the Strand. When I got to Charing Cross, the CCs outside the station had no information except that there would be no trains until after the fireworks.

By this time I had done a lot of walking and was starting to feel exhausted and tearful. I found a policeman, who said I should walk away from the river to get out of the increasingly dense crowds, and get a tube south from Leicester Square. I am not very familiar with the Underground network as I have lived for 50 years in south-east London where it doesn't go, and I was afraid to consult my phone because so many of my friends have had theirs stolen in the Charing Cross area.

Charing Cross Road and Leicester Square station were very crowded, lots of CCs and police, but I managed to get down to the Northern Line. I did not see or hear any information about station closures, but it was all very noisy and it seemed to be a very long walk underground. It was straightforward to get to Waterloo where I expected to be able to walk round to Waterloo East to pick up an Orpington train. I heard one announcement about lifts being out of operation, so was not surprised to see a man in a wheelchair stuck at the foot of an escalator at Waterloo.

The underground exit into Waterloo mainline station was closed. We were herded out through an unfamiliar exit into an extremely dense crowd behind the station. A large area of pavement against the station wall was empty except for CCs, closed off to keep the crowd away from the wall. A CC told me that I had to go through the crowd to the right and turn right into the mainline station. This distance, about 100 yards, took me more than half an hour during which I was lifted off my feet by the pressure of the crowd and experienced what I think was a panic attack. It was hard to breathe and I was shaking. A group of mixed-race youths noticed my distress. They shielded me and forced a path towards a barrier where a CC let me through to a little space close to the station wall where I could breathe a bit and calm down.

Crushed against the crowd-side of the barrier, a young Asian couple with two small children and a baby in a buggy tried to attract the attention of a CC. The father had a wristband allowing him access to his home, which was inside the restricted area, but the senior CC would not let him into the clear area behind the barriers to take his crying children home to bed.

Under the eye of the CC, I messaged my husband about missing the train, with no more trains until well after midnight.

Waterloo station was closed. The CC said I should go back to the underground and released me back into the crowd outside the closed station gates. Although I had had no desire or intention to see the fireworks, I had inadvertently wound up quite close to the action. The pressure of the crowd intensified towards the gates, and we were able to see part of the left-hand end of the display beyond the station buildings. There was absolutely no chance that I could move away from the gates towards freedom until after the fireworks.

Once the fireworks were over, the crowd wanted to disperse in two directions. Powerful individuals forced passages to and fro, crushing trapped people in the crowd. I was determined not to faint or fall down as I thought I could easily be trampled to death. Frightened parents were hoisting their children onto their shoulders. There were short surges, when I think small groups were being released

through the barriers to the underground station. A fight broke out a few feet in front of me so that the crowd tried to back away. Once I had rounded the corner, I passed a safe zone where someone behind the barrier was lying immobile on the ground, and someone else was having an epileptic seizure surrounded by bewildered CCs.

It was nearing 1am when I escaped from the crowd. I have rarely been so afraid, or felt so helpless. My husband texted about trains from Charing Cross, but they were not going to stop at Waterloo East. It did not look possible to get into the underground station, so I asked a CC if it would be possible to walk to Charing Cross, which was apparently open again, but would mean crossing the river somewhere. I wandered up and down main roads and back streets, asking for directions at every barrier. None of the CCs knew when the bridges would be opened again. One of them suggested I might catch a night bus to Charing Cross. I asked him if he had seen any buses at all. Two CCs were so Indian that I could not understand that they were directing me to Southwark station. One female CC shouted at me so loudly that it hurt my broken eardrum.

At 2am I found a policeman who said I should abandon Charing Cross and walk to London Bridge station, a walk of about 20 minutes. He was intelligent and sympathetic, and felt that even if there wasn't a train, there would be someone there who should be able to advise about trains to Orpington. I texted my husband who said there was a train from London Bridge at 2.40.

It took me 26 minutes to walk to London Bridge station, blown along in an increasingly blustery wind. Apart from occasional surges in the crowds when I had been lifted off them, I had been on my feet for just over four hours. I made it onto the train and got home at about 3.25 on New Year's Day.

There had been thousands of people on the streets of London who were almost as miserable and frustrated as I was over those long, helpless hours. There was something seriously wrong with the crowd control strategy that kept so many people trapped in London against their will, especially families with little children, and elderly and infirm people. Why close the stations at 11pm so that we couldn't escape?

There was too little information about transport.

There was too little warning of station closures, the timing of which was ill-conceived.

There was no visible, mapped pedestrian information about alternative routes where there were street closures.

There was a serious information and communication deficit among crowd control personnel.

It wasn't only me. Everywhere I went before the fireworks, people were trying to get away, to get home. I didn't see what happened to all the people sent pointlessly to Villiers Street, but they will have been trapped somewhere and had to wait until it was all over. Thank goodness I hadn't brought any of my grandchildren.

Was this, on balance, a joyful occasion for most of the people who were there? As a London ratepayer considering the cost of the fireworks, the extra policing, the barriers and the crowd control people, I wonder if it is worth it. I'd prefer that money to be spent providing some sort of housing and rehabilitation for all those rough sleepers in the Strand, who have failed to spot the urinal behind St Martin's.

It is not feasible to compete with Paris or Sydney when it comes to fireworks. Give it up, and spend the money on something that doesn't go up in smoke!

Yours faithfully,

Helen Chown, BA MPhil (Cantab).