

MAYOR OF LONDON

Night Surgery Islington





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Night Surgery: Islington

London's Night Czar Amy Lamé visited the London Borough of Islington for a night surgery in March 2023. The evening included a 'Hackathon' with students and residents in Clerkenwell, a roundtable with managers of grassroots cultural venues and a visit to staff at the Whittington Hospital in Archway.

Night time 'Hackathon' at Better Space

The evening began at a venue called Better Space on Farringdon Road. Formerly the Guardian's headquarters, it is now owned and managed by Islington Council as affordable co-working and office space for local social enterprises and businesses. The venue also hosts networking events, mentoring sessions and workshops.

This evening, Better Space was hosting a Night Time Hackathon organised by City University and Islington Council. Sponsored by the Mayor of London's Business Friendly Licensing Fund, the event invited Islington residents and City University students to form small interdisciplinary teams to address one of three challenges set by the council. The challenges asked teams to develop innovative ideas to support better working conditions for gig economy delivery riders, improve the health and wellbeing of night workers, and diversify Islington's night time economy by promoting family-friendly events.

I was delighted to give an introductory speech to help set the broader context for the challenges identified. I gave an overview of our holistic approach to night time planning, the social and economic value of high streets at night, and the inequalities facing London's night workers. I was joined by Islington's Night Time Borough Champion, Cllr Bell-Bradford, who delivered an inspirational speech about the value of Islington's night time businesses and night workers. Highlighting the density of night time activity in the borough, his assertion that "above every pub is a resident and behind every night club is a school" spoke to the need to carefully plan for the borough at night to preserve its vibrancy while protecting residential amenity.

I was so impressed by the enthusiasm and entrepreneurialism of the participants and can't wait to see the ideas they develop. Solutions to night time challenges need to come from cross-disciplinary and cross-sector thinking. The 'Hackathon' is a great format for workshopping ideas collaboratively. The teams are given two weeks to develop a business plan, with the help of expert advisors at Better Space and City University. They then pitch their ideas for a chance to win £1,500 in prizes. They can also access City University's 'Accelerator' programme, which includes coaching, access to workspaces, and guidance on turning their ideas into social enterprises. This type of event is a great way to tap into local people's skills, knowledge and expertise to address issues affecting them and their borough at night.



Amy Lamé sets the context for the Night time Hackathon



Amy Lamé and Cllr Bell-Bradford answer questions from the Hackathon participants

Roundtable in Angel

My next stop was a roundtable with grassroots cultural venues in Angel, hosted at Electrowerkz on Torrens Street. I was joined by managers from two other grassroots music venues - the Lexington and Slim Jim's - as well as the King's Head Theatre Pub, Angel Comedy Club, the Alpaca pub, council and Met Police licensing teams, Islington Council's Local Economy Team, and the local Business Improvement District, Angel.London.

Both Slim Jim's and the Lexington reported a surprisingly profitable 2022; more profitable than 2019, pre-pandemic. In fact, 2022 was The Lexington's best ever year for revenue. However, both venue operators were very concerned about rising costs and changing consumer behaviours in the year ahead.

With inflation and energy price hikes continuing, the increase in Business Rates from 1 April 2023 comes at a very bad time. Staff costs are also rising and venue owners emphasised how important it is for them to be able to retain staff on a decent salary. While costs rise, consumer behaviours shift – those who were weekly regulars now only visit every two to three weeks. Venue owners cited the cost of living crisis as one reason for these changes in behaviour, while recent London Underground strike action had also impacted trade.

Venues like Slim Jim's and The Lexington have been key stepping stones for emerging artists, but both are struggling to sell out shows and secure bookings for bigger artists. Booking agencies are increasingly bypassing smaller grassroots venues, opting instead for larger, more profitable events with capacities in their 1000s. This has had a knock-on effect on venues like The Lexington, which previously hosted a show every day but now only hosts four or five per week.

The Lexington used to be able to hand-pick gigs and curate their programme more closely, but the pressure to book acts and fill the venue consistently now means working with less experienced promoters. These younger, more local promoters are filling the gaps left by larger booking agencies and they're experiencing the steep learning curve of organising events for 200 people, having previously organised them for just 50. While this helps develop new promoters and support the music industry's ecosystem, venues are having to spend more time supporting them at a time when resources are already stretched.

We then heard from the King's Head Theatre, who explained that it was becoming difficult to programme shows because people are booking tickets much later than they used to. Audience numbers from the baby boomer and silent generations have not returned since the pandemic and

they speculated that they might be choosing bigger, higher-budget shows in the West End, where ticket prices have been discounted. The theatre is also navigating a move to a new 200-capacity venue in Islington Square, where they aim to diversify their audience and attract first-time theatre-goers. They are seeking to extend their marketing to help secure audiences for the new venue.

Electrowerkz hosts a range of events from club nights to weddings. The owners noted that club nights appealing to middle aged customers had struggled to bounce back to pre-pandemic levels of attendance. Club nights on Fridays and Saturdays don't bring in enough revenue to pay the bills so they are considering corporate events as an additional revenue stream during the week. Like the Lexington and Slim Jims, they were also finding it harder to find experienced club promoters and technicians, so the venue was not currently fulfilling its potential.

Angel Comedy Club is struggling to keep prices affordable as their operating costs rise. Although shows are sold out, people are spending less at the venue itself. The comedy club hosts free workshops at the weekend and would benefit from access to a separate, affordable space to host those events, freeing up the comedy club for revenue-generating shows.

Several of the venue owners and managers wanted to see dedicated support and marketing campaigns to promote cultural venues and events in Angel. They wanted better signposting and platforms to market their events to the local community, as advertising space on billboards or in Underground stations is expensive. The BID is looking to develop an app that facilitates coordinated marketing of events and attractions. Islington Council also suggested including marketing from venues in their corporate communications, quarterly newsletter to all residents, and on council-owned digital screens.

Many around the table were dealing with technical skills shortages and having difficulties filling roles such as lighting technicians, stage managers and sound engineers. National evidence suggests that 30-40% of the workforce left the sector due to Covid-19 lockdowns, which severely disrupted the industry. The venues would love to train the new generation of skilled professionals and the council suggested tapping into unspent apprenticeship levies. Venues could also connect with the National Youth Theatre, which is based in the borough and already partners with London Met University to train theatre staff and technicians. The grassroots cultural organisations were keen to support young people into the industry

and promote work in the creative industries as an attractive and viable career.

Although crime figures are relatively low in Angel, particularly when compared to other night time destinations, businesses still worried that perceptions of on-street crime were impacting Angel's appeal as a destination. The BID had recently hosted their crime summit, which found that crime levels peaked in the area between 3pm and 6pm, driven largely by retail theft. I heard from the police that they have good relationships with venues in Islington, with the licensing team rarely having to resort to enforcement actions. It was brilliant to see such a joined up approach between the police, businesses, the BID and the council.



Roundtable with grassroots venue owners



The courtyard at Elektrowerkz

Navigator Square

From Angel, we took a bus towards Navigator Square in Archway. We passed the Islington Assembly Hall, a council-owned venue which, before Covid, hosted community-run events each year. This offer has been revived post-Pandemic to provide four free hires for the community per year. Islington's licensing officer explained that the Union Chapel, a nearby music venue that hosts many international artists, had been badly affected by unfavourable exchange rates, leaving large gaps in its programming.

The recently redeveloped Navigator Square sits at the heart of wider regeneration ambitions for the area. Archway has just been awarded Creative Enterprise Zone status, as one of the Mayor of London's three new zones across the capital. With its host of 'hidden gem' arts and cultural organisations clustered around the square, the zone covers a 500m radius from the Square itself. The Archway Tavern overlooks the north of the square and since it reopened in 2020, the pub and venue has helped animate the heart of Archway. We discussed the financial and skills related challenges facing the wider hospitality sector and the need to create attractive careers in the sector, with LLW accreditation being an important factor, that many hospitality venues struggle to provide.

While the Archway Tavern provides an anchor venue on the square, there are a few notable long-term vacant sites in and around it. The most notable of these is the Archway Methodist Hall. Built in 1934, the building is locally listed and has a 1,300 capacity hall, with many of the community calling for its refurbishment as a cultural venue. The council is also allocating UK Shared Prosperity Funding to activate underused assets as affordable creative workspace close to Archway Station, so the Methodist Church is a significant development opportunity that could become an anchor performance venue, helping to create an ecosystem of creative and cultural uses in Archway.



Navigator Square at the heart of Islington's CEZ



Underused assets on Navigator Square

Whittington Hospital

My final stop of the evening was the Whittington Hospital. Staff at the hospital work 12-hour night shifts from 7pm to 7am. This means that many can access public transport before and after work. Everyone that works night shifts there also regularly works during the day.

The hospital has a canteen and impressive food court, but this closes in the early evening so doesn't cater for night workers. Many workers are therefore reliant on delivery services to the hospital after 6pm, limiting their access to fresh and affordable food. The surrounding area also lacks options for healthy food at night.

The A&E department sees patients needing emergency care but also attends to non-emergency cases, such as people who have become intoxicated. The A&E department is no longer seen as a last resort but the only option for those seeking medical attention at night. To relieve pressure on A&E, the staff at the hospital are exploring options to create a space for intoxicated people who may just need somewhere to lie down, charge their phones and have a glass of water.

It was brilliant to hear that the hospital pays all 4,500 employees in the NHS trust at least the London Living Wage and received its accreditation last year. Other health and wellbeing initiatives adopted by the hospital include a new 'amber' and 'red' warning system that staff can issue to patients behaving aggressively, and formalising the process through which security can intervene. Staff have reported feeling safer since these systems were put in place.



The walk from Archway Station up to the Whittington Hospital



Staff at the Whittington Hospital

Final Thoughts

Islington is home to a rich diversity of night time activity and boasts some iconic grassroots cultural venues. It was exciting to discuss opportunities for closer collaboration on marketing and place promotion, addressing skills gaps, supporting a new generation of creatives and improving working conditions and pay for night workers.

My visit to Islington provided lots of examples of the power of working in partnership, across disciplines, and across public and private sectors. It was brilliant to see such strong partnerships between the council, higher education institutions, grassroots cultural venues, the BID and the hospital. I'm really excited to see the results of the Hackathon and hope this can provide a model for others to follow in developing their night time strategies.

ARCHWAY METHODIST CHURCH

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DYNAMICS.COM



DOWE DYNAMICS

Archway Methodist Church
Sunday
Worship
11.00am

Sunday School
Guides & Brownies

Archway Methodist Church
Superintendent
Minister
Revd Timothy J. Bradshaw, MSc.
020 7272 2241

Baptisms
Weddings
Funerals
By Arrangement with a Minister

SUNDAY SERVICE

POB



Hackathon Update

Over 70 people applied to be involved in the Sustainable City Hackathon. The winning team, Bien Manger, won £1,000 in prize money to further develop their business plan, along with comprehensive business support. The team was made up of City students Jonathon Ryder-Weldon (MSc Data Science), Angelina Puri (BSc Computer Science), Mariella Hilton (start-up founder and Islington resident) and Rebecca Somer (MSc Organisational Psychology).

Bien Manger's winning proposal was to open a healthy and affordable food store in Islington to cater to the borough's night-time workforce, which includes NHS staff and students. The team had identified a lack of healthy and affordable food options in Islington late at night.

The highest percentage of people who work at night are healthcare workers, followed by professionals working in entertainment such as bars and clubs. Islington in particular is active at night, with many people travelling, socialising and working after 8pm. Night-time workers tend to work in shifts with irregular hours and are more likely to experience poor health outcomes. Bien Manger hope to address that issue and cater in particular to NHS workers and students.

The panel of judges who made the final decision on the winning team included Cllr Santiago Bell-Bradford, Islington's Executive Member for Inclusive Economy and Jobs, Matt Nicol from the Social Enterprise School and City's Students' Union President Gesmina Tsourrai.



Participants workshop ideas for improving Islington at night



Bien Manger, the winning team

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