

MAYOR OF LONDON

Night Surgery Tower Hamlets





Night Surgery: White Chapel, Tower Hamlets

London's Night Czar, Amy Lamé, reflects on her visit to Whitechapel Road in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets.

Whitechapel, with its bustling market, is undergoing rapid and significant change. The council offices are relocating to the former Royal London Hospital, forming a new civic quarter, and new large-scale commercial and residential developments are planned for the area.

This visit was a great opportunity to discuss the opportunities for these developments to enhance the after-dark character of the area and contribute to its social, cultural and economic life at night. It was also a chance to look at what a night-time vision for Whitechapel might be, drawing upon the area's unique strengths and characteristics, and differentiating itself from nearby Brick Lane.

It struck me that as we got stuck into these issues we were informally implementing the 'Night Test'; a policy that could help ensure new developments are designed with night time challenges and opportunities in mind from the outset.

We began on Whitechapel Road where the local authority is planning public realm and lighting improvements with partners, such as TfL, supported by Levelling Up funding.

Whitechapel Road Market



Whitechapel Road Market

The project will see new, permanent market infrastructure piloted along the street, with weatherproof stalls that are easy to set up and dismantle. The council will install a few prototypes on the street and ask traders to test and feed back on the different designs before finalising the proposals. Understanding how the market stalls are used and contribute to the streetscape at night will be a key part of the design process. It was very encouraging to see strong engagement with traders and a commitment to prototyping designs to test their use by day and night. The new stalls could, in the future, allow for later trading or night markets.

As we walked along the market, I noted opportunities to improve the lighting and reduce clutter on the footway. We also discussed the importance of high quality shopfront lighting to provide visual interest and illumination. Council officers also reported that phone boxes attract anti-social behaviour and that there was a clear over-provision of these along the street.

Idea Store



Outside the Idea Store

Our next stop was the Idea Store. Established in 2005, the popular community centre and library hosts educational facilities and evening events until 9pm, attracting visitors from outside the borough. It was great to hear from staff about the Idea Store's role in the local community, which otherwise lacks variety in places to meet and socialise after 6pm. I was excited to hear that they are hoping to relocate their top floor café to the ground floor to provide street-facing, visible activity that creates a welcoming social space in the evenings and offers an alternative to local pubs.

Blind Beggar and London Hospital Tavern



View towards the London Hospital Tavern from the hospital

Local hospitality businesses told me about their shared concerns over poor lighting and perceptions of safety, particularly at bus stops along the high street. It was brilliant to hear that licensed venues have established their own Pubwatch-style network, using a shared messaging platform to communicate quickly about safety concerns. They told me how this has supported them in looking after their customers, each other and the area at night.

After consulting with local businesses, the council is looking to employ a town centre manager to improve communication and partnership working between stakeholders on the high street. The area will see significant growth and investment in the coming years, so it was encouraging to see the council investing in services to ensure businesses benefit from this growth and investment.

Business owners also told me they would like to see a food market introduced on the street in the evenings to create an attraction and fulfil demand.

Royal London Hospital and emerging civic campus



Discussing plans for the town hall and civic centre

The relocation of the town hall to Whitechapel is introducing a new civic centre for the area. A new life sciences campus will also occupy five new buildings next to the hospital. These developments will increase footfall, as will new housing and the arrival of the Elizabeth Line.

Planning for the life of these new communities after 6pm and ensuring integration with the existing character and communities will be critical. A good mix of 24-hour amenities and post-6pm social, cultural and educational facilities will be required to serve demand from residents, workers and visitors.

We discussed the public realm outside the hospital entrance, which forms an important meeting and dwell space for patients, staff and visitors 24 hours a day. We identified opportunities that could make the space more attractive, with lighting and public art helping to improve an environment where people might often be feeling distressed and vulnerable.

I also heard that access to healthy food options for hospital workers remains a key issue. We know from the [GLA's recently published research](#), that this is a common challenge for hospital workers across the capital. Providing access to affordable, healthy and convenient food options around hospitals is essential for the wellbeing of night workers in the healthcare sector.

Whitechapel Gallery



Whitechapel Art Gallery

We walked down the high street to Whitechapel Gallery to meet the operations team and the manager of the recently established Aldgate Business Improvement District (BID).

The Whitechapel Gallery has been bringing world-class free art to East London since 1901 and runs a varied programme of engagement, outreach and activities. The gallery runs Thursday Lates, staying open until 9pm, and before the pandemic began experimenting with opening later on Fridays as well. I was excited to hear plans for their annual Nocturnal Creatures event on 23 July, which will animate a range of under-used and unusual spaces with artistic installations and performances at night.

The BID supports the area in a variety of ways, including providing restaurants with support in dealing with their local licensing authority. The BID footprint encompasses areas in both Tower Hamlets and the City of London and is a great example of cross-borough working.

It was great to see the Whitechapel Gallery engaging with the BID and to hear first-hand about the benefits of closer partnership working and information sharing.

East London Mosque



East London Mosque

The East London Mosque sits at the heart of a religious, social and economic ecosystem of businesses, visitors and organisations. The mosque has a large catchment area, attracting people from across London, the UK and even further afield.

With Ramadan fast approaching, the mosque was preparing for one of its busiest times of the year, which sees the space open at 5am. At peak times, the complex can welcome up to 7,000 people a night.

It was brilliant to hear of very close working between the mosque and the council and the flexibility afforded to local businesses seeking to tailor their opening hours according to the mosque's extended schedule. Throughout Ramadan, alongside local businesses staying open later, food trucks and market stalls pop up around the mosque, staying open until around 2am.

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Final thoughts

This night surgery was a wonderful opportunity to see first-hand the intensity of overlapping uses along a high street. I was struck by the impact of the market on the street's character and the contrast between the early evening bustle of the market packing down while commuters leave to the quietness of the road just a couple of hours later.

I enjoyed seeing such a variety of night time activities, which reinforced the importance of a holistic, broad and inclusive understanding of 'night life'. Night life includes workers, patients and visitors in a hospital that operates 24 hours a day. It includes the Muslim community breaking fast together during Ramadan. It includes people taking an evening class at the Idea Store.

The evening was a reminder of the diversity of London at night and the need to both protect and better support existing businesses and community assets, alongside providing space for new ones to serve those arriving in the future.

I look forward to continuing our work with Tower Hamlets as the regeneration of Whitechapel Road continues and am excited to see how the night time character of the street adapts to these big moves.

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