

A Vision for Queer Culture in London

This vision has been developed by the Queer Spaces Network – an informal group of people from a wide range of backgrounds committed to supporting and developing LGBTQ+I spaces in London. This work was undertaken in response to interest from the Greater London Authority's Culture Team in supporting queer spaces during the development of the new London Plan. This document will continue to be developed over time with the addition of new perspectives in the group.

London is one of the great global cities and it should also be a world-class queer city. However, in recent years, several factors have come together that threaten London's vibrant LGBTQ+I (queer) community (1), creating an urgent need for an effective policy response from local, regional and national government. This response will influence London's capacity to be a world-class queer city, with all the social, cultural and economic benefits that implies; and its integrity as a safe, respectful and supportive home for a community that remains acutely vulnerable to social exclusion.

The queer community is not homogenous. It is inclusive of many different people who often express complex sexuality, sex and/or gender identities (2, p.19). However, what binds the queer community together is the experience of social 'othering', where expression of these identities at home, in places of work or education, or in public can result in shaming, bullying, physical exclusion or harassment and violence. This experience is often reinforced by social institutions such as the media, advertising and cultural and political platforms that portray queer identities as unusual, abnormal or highly stereotyped, reinforcing inaccurate assumptions and resulting in further harm to individuals.

In response to these experiences, the queer community has developed a unique culture, expressed and nurtured in specific spaces which often act as sanctuaries, allowing freer expression of individuality and the sharing of common experience. Often this expression challenges widely held social norms that serve to stigmatise and discriminate against the community. This ranges from subverting gender norms in drag queen and drag king performances, hosted in women's, men's and mixed spaces, to queer spoken word and poetry nights; from challenging and entertaining theatrical performances, to social gatherings to share stories and offer support to club nights encouraging the expression of mind-bending fashions.

The dynamic and fruitful experience of queer spaces is often difficult to replicate in other venues not designated for the purpose: it depends on an organic and fragile combination of social, cultural and urban factors (2, p.16-17). But queer spaces are typically well-integrated into their neighbourhoods, and co-productive with other creative and cultural industries (2, p.17). The work developed in queer spaces often proves highly influential on more mainstream arenas, shaping national and international festivals, theatre, TV, music, fashion, design and literature enjoyed by millions around the globe.

The state of queer culture in London

London falls behind many of its global peers when protecting and supporting the queer community, including in failing to provide a dedicated community space, unlike New York, Berlin, Los Angeles and San Francisco. This comes at a time when, despite progress towards legal equality, the queer community remains disproportionately vulnerable to social exclusion. Following the referendum on European Union membership, there has been a spike in reported homophobic hate crime, with a rise of 147% recorded in the 3 months after the vote (3).

These figures were already rising. So too have been figures around queer vulnerability to issues around physical and mental health, bullying and housing.

In recent years, the substantial rise in property prices and costs of private rental in London has had a significant acute effect on the ability of spaces of queer community and culture to function. The high value of residential property has sparked the interest of speculative developers who have bought up queer spaces and attempted to convert them into more lucrative residential or retail units. This market pressure has affected spaces such as The Black Cap in Camden, Madame JoJo's in Soho and the Joiners Arms in Tower Hamlets (which have been closed) and The Royal Vauxhall Tavern (which has been bought by property developers whose plans remain unclear) (2, p.11-12).

Queer spaces are important for the welfare and wellbeing of queer people in London and act as essential community spaces. Queer people have significantly worse mental health than the general population, which is likely exacerbated by the chronic experience of social othering. This includes high levels of moderate to severe anxiety and depression, as well as higher rates of self-harm and suicide (4). Young LGBT people are also significantly more likely than their heterosexual peers to have attempted self-harm and considered suicide (5). Older queer people are more likely to be socially isolated. After the unexpected closure of The Black Cap, demand for help from Camden LGBT Forum around acute isolation and mental health issues trebled (6). Without the right support, many LGBT people turn to alcohol or drugs to combat loneliness and the experience of shame (7), resulting in higher levels of harmful substance use.

High rental costs have exacerbated the significant problem of homelessness amongst queer young people (who make up 24% of young homeless people (8)) and associated closure of queer spaces means less community support is available. Research conducted by the UCL Urban Lab with the Queer Spaces Network and The Raze Collective, highlighted a recent intensity in closures of longstanding queer nightlife spaces, especially those catering to women and black and minority ethnic communities (2).

The vision

Support for queer spaces is an issue that straddles the night time economy, protecting vulnerable minority groups, and promoting social integration. London should be a city with a thriving queer cultural scene, with spaces protected for queer culture through a supportive legislative and planning environment. All queer people should feel safe and secure, both in public and in dedicated spaces, with the ability to express their individuality without fear of negative discrimination. All queer people must be able to access relevant community support through equal access to queer spaces. To achieve this the GLA must make queer culture a priority for the city, to support and promote a vibrant queer culture, and the empowerment of all queer people.

Our asks to the GLA

To achieve the above vision, we are asking the GLA to take the following actions:

1. For the Mayor to affirm the social, cultural and economic value of LGBTQI+ spaces in the forthcoming London Plan, recognizing their integral role to London's global identity through, for example, tourism and world-class cultural production, and in providing an internationally relevant model of a city with a culture of LGBTQI+ inclusivity.

2. Designate all LGBTQI+ spaces pre-dating 1986, and others as determined through a process of research and community engagement, as legacy venues with protection against redevelopment, as per the model in San Francisco.
3. Direct all local planning authorities to ensure no net loss of LGBTQI+ spaces year on year. We expect this will require support for an audit of existing LGBTQI+ spaces.
4. Direct all local planning authorities to review their lists of designated and non-designated heritage assets to offer protection to suitable sites with LGBTQI+ heritage interest.
5. Direct any development that proposes to remove an LGBTQI+ space to carry out research into consequences for social integration and the mental health and wellbeing of the local LGBTQI+ community.
6. Direct Night Czar to hold quarterly surgeries dedicated to LGBTQI+ nightlife to listen to the ongoing concerns of the community and monitor progress against this vision.
7. Direct the Night Czar to establish a regular forum with LGBTQI+ business owners to better understand their specific needs in terms of licensing, policing and interaction with local government.
8. The GLA should develop a forum to bring together relevant departments, including housing, planning, transport, health, policing and social integration and local authorities to discuss the needs of the queer community and disseminate best practice.
9. The GLA should commission joint research into better understanding the needs of the queer community in London; how LGBTQI+ people interact with public and private spaces; and what further action needs to be taken to improve the safety and wellbeing of queer people in London.

- **Existing spaces**

We recognise that some spaces are no longer commercially viable and must close. However, many of the venues that have closed in the last 3 years were commercially successful, but sold on for redevelopment. Given the lack of queer spaces operated on a non-commercial basis (e.g. by charities, statutory funding or community initiatives), existing planning laws must be applied with specific consideration to the special status and importance of queer spaces. The GLA should develop Legacy Business regulations to protect long-established spaces (those which predate 1986) as per the model used in San Francisco. Spaces with particular LGBTQI+ heritage may include listed buildings, locally listed buildings and conservation areas (including management guideline documents) and local planning authorities must include policies for the protection of LGBTQI+ assets and places within their local plans. Local planning authorities should have regard to Historic England's Pride of Place guidance on these matters. They should also facilitate applications for the designation as Assets of Community Value for relevant LGBTQI+ spaces.

Where new residential developments are built near to existing venues, Agent of Change principles must apply. Where new developments cause the closure of existing spaces, policies of Like-for-like venue replacement and No Net Loss should be implemented as well as the application by Local Authorities of Deed of easement under Section 106.

All London venues should be incentivized and supported to cater to queer groups, being offered advice on issues such as safe travel and transport to and from venues, training of security and bar staff, and appropriate facilities, including accessibility and gender-neutral toilets.

- **New Spaces**

Restrictive planning laws and policies enacted by local councils has meant that as spaces close it is too difficult to open new spaces, particularly as commercial space is being swiftly converted into residential space. Many councils look unfavourably on granting new entertainment and alcohol licences, which are often essential to running queer cultural spaces. Business rates can also be prohibitively expensive. The GLA should work with Local Councils, national government and the queer community to consider relevant aspects of licencing policy, policing and support for opening new queer spaces. This may include meanwhile use of otherwise empty spaces.

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- (1) LGBTQI+ is an acronym used to describe a large and diverse population group within society who have less common characteristics relating to their sexuality, sex and/or gender identity. It includes people who identify as gay, lesbian and bisexual, such as men who have sex with men and women who have sex with women. Sometimes an A is also included, for people who identify as asexual, generally defined as people with a low or absent interest in sex with other people of any gender. It includes Transgender people, who identify as a gender other than the one they were assigned at birth, or who have transitioned (or are in the process of transitioning) from one gender to another. It also includes people who are intersex, whose bodies do not necessarily fit a binary categorisation of what male and female bodies should look like, irrespective of their gender identity. The Q is sometimes interpreted as questioning, which describes people who are unsure of their identity in relation to one or more of the above categories, or it can also be used to include people who identify as queer, who often reject fixed labels and identify with a sense of social otherness, which may be related to aspects of their gender or sexual identity. It is also often interpreted to be inclusive of those people who don't identify as any of these categories, but are accepting and supporting of people who do; although this group is sometimes described as allies or as the LGBTQI+ community. For the purposes of this document, we have used 'queer' as shorthand for the communities described above.
- (2) Campkin B, Marshall L (2016): LGBTQI Nightlife in London, 1986 to Present. Pub. UCL Urban Lab. From: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/urbanlab/news/ucl-research-evidences-impact-of-lgbtqi-nightlife-venue-closures-on-london-communities>
- (3) The Guardian (2016). From: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/oct/08/homophobic-attacks-double-after-brexite-vote>. Statistics provided by Galop (2016): <http://www.galop.org.uk>.
- (4) Stonewall (2016). From: https://www.stonewall.org.uk/sites/default/files/Mental_Health_Stonewall_Health_Briefing__2012_.pdf/
- (5) Metro (2016). Youth Chances: Integrated Report: https://www.metrocentreonline.org/pdfs/Experiences_LGBTQ_Intergrated%20Report2015.pdf.
- (6) Camden LGBT Forum - personal communication, September 2016: <http://camdenlgbtforum.org.uk>.
- (7) LGBT Foundation (2016): <http://lgbt.foundation/information-advice/mental-health/negative-influences/>
- (8) Albert Kennedy Trust (2015). LGBT Youth Homelessness. From: http://www.akt.org.uk/webtop/modules/_repository/documents/AlbertKennedy_ResearchReport_FINALInteractive.pdf