

DRAFT COVENT GARDEN ACTION PLAN
Overview and Key Points for WLA

- As part of a series of initiatives to improve the West End, Westminster Council has published a draft Action Plan for Covent Garden. This follows similar initiatives in Leicester Square and China Town. The Action Plan flows out of the Council's Civic Renewal Initiative.
- The draft Action Plan has been developed in consultation with local business groups – notably the In and Around Covent Garden Restaurant Association and Covent Garden Business Forum.
- The area covered by the Action Plan is wider than just the Covent Garden Piazza and is bordered by Shelton Street in the North, Wild Street and Keen Street in East, The Strand in the South and St Martin's Lane in the West.
- This area is sub-divided into four distinct areas – the piazza and surrounding areas; St Martin's Lane and surrounding streets; Long Acre to Shelton Street; and, Bow Street to Keen Street. The piazza will be the focus for initial activity.

The Aim/Vision

- In contrast to other documents brought out as part of Civic Renewal, the Action Plan has a noticeably more positive tone towards the licensed trade and the role it plays in the overall business mix of the area.
- The foreword from Simon Milton notes that Covent Garden is a “vibrant destination for shopping, eating out, visiting the theatre, opera or ballet or celebrating a special occasion” it is also a “great place to live or work”. The introduction goes on to note the fact that it is an “international destination famous as much for its street entertainment and lively atmosphere as for its theatres, boutique shops, bars and restaurants”.
- Although the document does acknowledge that the popularity of the area means that it is facing a number of pressures – and noise and late night entertainment are referred to in this context – there is no attempt as in previous documents to blame the trade for all the areas ills. This is possibly because of the involvement of business representatives during early drafting. Indeed the late night economy is categorised as one of the “physical characteristics of Covent Garden” and something that has to coexist with residential use.
- In fact, the key area singled out as being the source of many of the problems is illegal street trading, noisy and poor quality busking and other undesirable activities.
- There are two main notes of caution to be sounded, however. Firstly, the document states that any actions will need to pay close attention to the Conservation Management Guide produced by the Covent Garden Area Trust, WCC and English Heritage which may impact on developments and existing businesses.
- Secondly, the Action Plan sets out a number of short, medium and long term steps to tackle some of these specific problems – transport, street environment and enforcement. The foreword notes, however, that the Council does not have the resources to implement all of these proposed actions and will be looking for “significant input” from others. A number of these are clearly signposted.

An overview of the key issues affecting the 4 areas is set out before specific action points on transport, street environment and enforcement are considered. Only those issues of particular relevance to the licensed trade are highlighted here.

- **Area 1 – the Piazza:** The key issue of concern here relates to tube capacity and access to Covent Garden generally and congestion around James Street. Illegal activity – from rickshaws to buskers and street traders is highlighted and an early signal is given that additional funding will be required to tackle these problems.
- **Area 2 – St Martin’s Lane:** the key issue here is vagrancy – street drinking, rough sleeping and begging. In addition, traffic management of hotspots and improved pedestrianisation are referred to. Again, a clear signal is given of the need to find partnership funding from businesses to establish a programme of “street scene” improvements.
- **Area 3 – Long Acre/Neal Street:** the key objective here is to make the narrow streets in this area more pedestrian-friendly and welcoming, particularly at night, through improved lighting, expanded CCTV. Again, landowners are highlighted as the source of funding for this. The other main issue here is liaison with Camden Council and the suggestion that the Seven Dials Monument Charity be given jurisdiction in Westminster.
- **Area 4 – Bow Street:** this area is highlighted as being “lively at night” with potential conflicts between licensed premises and residents. The main objective here is to encourage people to leave quietly and to look at meeting the needs of theatres and theatregoers in respect of street cleansing. There is clearly the possibility that this is the area of the plan which will draw most criticism for the trade.

Transport

- The core of the document is an analysis of the transport issues affecting the area which exacerbate many of the identified problems. In particular, the limited capacity of Covent Garden Station and the lack of knowledge of visitors about other means of accessing the area or navigating within it are highlighted.
- As a short term measure, the Council is working with London Underground to encourage people to use nearby stations with spare capacity such as Holborn, Embankment and Charing Cross and promote walking routes to reduce reliance on Covent Garden Station itself.
- London Underground has plans to improve the Covent Garden ticket hall but the Council is keen to maintain pressure on them to develop physical improvements to the station such as more escalators or lifts, a second ticket hall and a feasibility study has been carried out. WLA may be able to assist in supporting WCC’s lobby to ensure that Covent Garden remains a priority for action.
- The Council is keen to encourage pedestrians to use more of Covent Garden and explore areas away from the Piazza but this causes its own problems as better signage may add to street clutter and brings conflict with vehicles at certain points.
- It will carry out an audit of directional pedestrian signage, particularly in respect of access to transport, to identify improvements and will work with Camden Council on this and traffic calming measures.

- The action plan states that they will look at ‘initiatives to ensure people leaving entertainment premises in the early hours are informed of their transport options’ but no further detail is provided on this. We will need to ensure that this does not get translated into standard conditions.
- One option being considered by Transport for London’s Public Carriage Office on a possible marshalled ordering point for taxis on Cranbourn Street. WCC will also lobby the PCO to introduce the licensing of minicab drivers and vehicles as soon as possible. These are two initiatives which WLA could support.
- A kerb-side survey will be carried out to identify parking and loading problems in Covent Garden. A route planning map will be developed for businesses to hand to deliver drivers. It is interesting to note in this context that earlier drafts of the Action Plan had made specific reference to possible restrictions on Sunday parking – these have been removed from the final version.

Street Environment

- Much of this section relates to the need for clear and legible signage and the removal of “clutter” from the street scene. There are also references to the need to improve street surfaces, street lighting and CCTV coverage in the area and ensuring that the historic gas lighting does not mean CCTV is ineffective. One suggestion that is made on improving lighting is that ground floor commercial premises should leave their display lights on overnight.
- The main issue of concern to licensed businesses in this section is the reference to tables and chairs. Referring to street clutter, the action plan states that it is the Council’s intention to ‘review and rationalise’ road and directional signage, bollards, planters, A boards and tables and chairs. This can only be taken to mean a reduction in the number.
- The document acknowledges the popularity of outdoor tables and chairs and the fact that alfresco dining is a popular activity, bringing vitality and character to streets and social and economic benefits to Covent Garden. However, it goes on to state that many streets are too narrow to accommodate tables and chairs and that they attract street crime. This justifies the introduction of a strict policy on location.
- Building on the work of the Covent Garden Area Trust, the Council will produce guidance on tables and chairs in the Piazza to identify what furniture designs will be acceptable in which areas and whether umbrellas should be allowed.
- The second main issue of concern in this section is public toilets and street urination. The Council identifies a number of “wetspots” still to be tackled and notes that additional resources may be required to tackle these. It suggests that “any proposals for any new development in Covent Garden, that might contribute to the problem, also contribute to its solution through the provision of new facilities and commitment to meet on-going costs”. It is not clear whether this would be a formal condition, planning gain or informal agreement.
- A new street cleansing contract is in place to improve street litter and waste collection. Grease staining from restaurants’ commercial waste is identified as a problem and the Council suggests extending the “bags off the streets” scheme piloted in Soho which required businesses to put their rubbish out only at specific times.

- Other actions identified under this heading include improved signage and tourist information from the Royal Opera House Russell Street Information Kiosk, business sponsorship of 1st floor window boxes and hanging baskets, tree planting.
- Although not referred to directly in the Action Plan itself, tucked away in the action points is a reference to the need to review whether supplementary planning guidance for central Covent Garden is required in light of the Covent Garden Action Trust's Caring for Central Covent Garden Conservation Management Plan. Such SPG would be subject to consultation but could set out specific micro planning policy for the area on matters such as tables and chairs etc.

Enforcement

- In contrast to most other recent documents, the enforcement section is directly towards illegal activity rather than the licensed trade.
- The Action Plan states that a high priority will be given to better enforcement of existing laws and policies as well as the new regimes. It will be important to ensure that this is taken forward and translated into reality. This will be particularly crucial because much of the Action Plan is taken over by simply reiterating what existing enforcement activity and resources are available.
- The key action point arising is the suggestion that a new team of private Community Wardens be established to act as the eyes and ears of the Council's 24 hour Operations Team and Police Community Support Officers. They will deal with anything from lighting faults to graffiti, supervise a busking licensing scheme, inspect those areas not part of the CCTV network and tackle street urination.
- The plan notes that there are no resources to fund this network and a commitment of funding will be required from landowners and other stakeholders.
- Noise nuisance is also referred to as a potential problem and the Council will look to educate customers of licensed premises on the quickest way to leave the area and of the fact that they are exiting in a residential area. Late night businesses also need to be encouraged to act responsibly by ensuring alfresco activity ceases promptly and conditions on late night licences are adhered to.
- The Council is keen to introduce a busking control zone to bring the problem under control but no funding is available at present. The zone would be monitored by the new Community Wardens.
- The Council is proposing to introduce a Street Drinking Control Area in Covent Garden, as part of a roll-out across the City. This will give discretionary powers to the police to ask people not to drink on the street in a particular area and to confiscate the alcohol.
- Again, tucked away in the recommended actions that enforcement activity will continue to target priority issues "such as tables and chairs, illegal street traders and buskers".

Next Steps

The draft will now be subject to public consultation, which closes on 6th January. The aim will be to publish a final version at the end of Spring 2004.