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Vision for Soho – Soho Business Alliance Consultation Response

Please find below a collective response from the Soho Business Alliance to the questions posed in the recent consultation.

We also include immediately below a number of general collective thoughts to feed into this process.

General

We understand that our request for a 'bridge scheme' for Al Fresco beyond 1st October was rejected by Westminster's Cabinet. We believe this decision to be short sighted as the Covid19 crisis is by no means over and we would continue to seek and build compromise wherever possible.

The SBA welcomes the broad intent of the 'Vision' exercise to build upon the successes born from Al Fresco – e.g. less traffic, more cooperation and closer working conditions

The SBA welcomes the proposed outcome of the vision, being a series of projects – short term (quick wins), medium term and longer term.

We understand that WCC aim to implement the 'quick wins' – pavement widening etc – over the winter so that the benefit from such can be had again by spring of 2022.

We would hope to be able to identify areas of consensus early on in the process – i.e. less traffic / decent public toilets etc. There will be many.

We also understand there will be areas where disagreement exists – i.e. intensity of certain uses. There may need to be trade-offs.

In broad terms:

- Soho must remain a unique, diverse and welcoming place to socialise / work / live;
- Retain the character / spirit of Soho, whilst accepting this means different things to different people and groups;
- Soho must retain to its business and leisure focus and afford priority to such. It has the highest concentration of jobs 2nd only to the City of London;
- Soho Conservation Area to be enhanced and preserved. This means from the time of designation in the 1960s. A network of tight knit busy streets;
- Build upon success of 'Al Fresco' outdoor dining, whilst accepting that a permanent scheme will likely be less intense than the emergency scheme in East Soho (through the potential use of timed road closures and pavement build outs etc);

- Carefully consider other meaningful uses for (potentially) reclaimed streets such as retail (carts);
- Traffic reduction is generally welcomed, especially a reduction in through traffic. There is potential for ANPR enforcement;
- Disabled access, VIP and business access by vehicle must be retained. This is particularly important for the film industry, high end restaurants, clubs and theatres;
- The loss of on-street visitor parking spaces is likely to be acceptable, but residents parking spaces should be retained;
- Explore potential for timed street closures of the secondary connecting streets to facilitate Al Fresco with rising bollards (see St Nicholas Market in Bristol);
- Opportunity for consolidated refuse collection;
- Opportunity for consolidated and/or time limited deliveries;
- Pedestrian movement from Cross Rail station in Dean Street needs further consideration – current proposed arrangement post completion of the work doesn't encourage movement into Soho;
- Factor in the few remaining large development sites into the plan – e.g. NCP sites and Poland Street / Marlborough Street – and what part they might play;
- New purpose built public toilets with older facilities re-purposed (café bar in Broadwick Street?);
- Factor in how the significant recent increase in the level of residential accommodation in Soho has already changed its character and increased potential for conflicts between uses (see Hopkins Street);
- Ensure the future, careful curation of Soho!

Q. What is it in its culture and identity that makes Soho unique?

Soho means different things to different people.

Throughout history Soho has consistently reinvented itself.

It has always been an area of tolerance and inclusion for the dispossessed and different. This has contributed to making Soho the centre of a creative industry which has in itself gone on to contribute to the improvement of other districts and local economies.

This includes Music, Science & Literature, Bohemian Drunkenness, TV film post production, Theatre, Food & Drink and Hospitality, to name just a few.

We suggest, however, that nobody has a claim to freeze Soho in the nostalgia of (their own) time.

Soho is anti-legislation, anti-establishment, and free spirited. It is a sanctuary for the weird and unwelcome elsewhere.

Q. How can we define the Spirit of Soho and tell its stories?

Accept its rich history, which is well written about, and was instrumental in social change, acceptance and diversity.

Celebrate it, but do not tie Soho down to its past. Accept it has a dynamic future, where the agent of change prevails over all prejudice.

Q. What do businesses need from Soho's public realm to thrive?

To put it simply, to have free and easy access for people to come and go and, importantly, dwell. This is particularly important in view of the new access points that will be delivered by the QE2 line (Crossrail).

We will see more people entering Soho from the North into and through Soho Square which should be a good example of place sharing and not a public car park and toilet.

Make more room on the streets for alternative uses (to traffic and parking), such as AI Fresco and retail.

Q. How can the public realm help to manage the impact of business (e.g. evening & night time economy?)

Control and reduce access by car, potentially via restricting through traffic, timed road closures and the use of ANPR.

Consider pavement build outs to facilitate AI Fresco and other uses.

Identify opportunities for further business support or activations, such as pop ups or events. There are many events that could come to Soho as it is the 'Heart of Creativity'.

Soho has venues that can easily provide and support live entertainment, including Squares that could be redesigned to support evening concerts and Christmas Markets etc.

We have a hospitality offering that is second to none and we must continue to build upon this.

Q. Other things to consider?

People will come to Soho to enjoy Soho. However Soho cannot rest and/or rely upon its past as 'The West End' as a guarantor of future success.

There is lots of competition out there – e.g. Kings Cross and Battersea. We must continually work to improve the offering.

Q. What are the most significant challenges to climate action in present day Soho?

The age of many of the buildings.

Unnecessary through traffic.

Q. What do you see as the immediate opportunities to address climate challenges?

Removal of unnecessary through traffic.

Q. What long term initiatives could be trialled in Soho?

Refuse and delivery consolidation.

Q. Other things to consider?

Please refer to the general points made at the start of this response letter.

Q. Where do you find it hardest to walk around Soho and why?

In general there are no difficulties which are not historic. Soho comprises a very busy, tight knit, network of streets. That is its intrinsic character.

Dropped Kerb arrangements could be considered for wheelchair users.

Q. Where do you experience challenges around heavy traffic and through movement?

Generally between 9.00am to 10.30am when delivery vans can block the main roads.

Q. What has been the impact of temporary road closures on the ease of movement?

North South movement has been available throughout Al Fresco.

North South resident access has been permitted through the evening closures.

East West movement has been restricted on one street only – Old Compton Street.

We do not consider that the temporary road closures have had any significant adverse impact on traffic movement.

It is accepted that the number of tables permitted in some locations has restricted pedestrian movement and needs to be re-considered, although the principle of timed street closures is supported.

Q. What are the barriers to cycling in Soho and where do they exist?

We see no barriers, other than busy streets which, again, are part of the intrinsic character of Soho.

Soho benefits from plentiful cycle parking and Santander bikes.

Q. What are the challenges for existing open spaces and how could they be improved?

Soho Sq. and Golden Sq. in particular should be earmarked for improvement, with less car parking around the perimeters, and improved green space and used to encourage public use.

These spaces should not be closed when the 'wrong type' of people gather.

Other 'urban' spaces should be identified for coordinated improvement, such as Broadwick Street, to allow increased public use in addition to being a thoroughfare.

Conclusions

At the outset the SBA acknowledge that there will need to be compromise if the vision is to come to fruition.

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However, we believe this to be a pivotal moment for the ongoing reinvention of Soho and an opportunity that must be fully grasped to enable once in a lifetime change.

We note that in order for the eventual vision to be enacted WCC have stated that it must be supported by 'a majority of residents'. This, we would submit, is simply wrong. Residents make up just one element of what constitutes Soho's vast stakeholder grouping and, as such, must not hold a veto. Rather, the vision must be supported by 'a majority of respondents' which includes businesses, and those who live and work in Soho.

We ask to be kept updated so we can be ready to engage further and, in due course, to mobilise our respondents.

Yours sincerely

Peter Lawson
For and on behalf of Soho Business Alliance