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Submission to the Greater London Authority
Re: Consultation on the Proposed Oxford Street Mayoral Development Area

2 May 2025

To whom it may concern,

We, the Conservative Group of Councillors on Westminster City Council, write to express our strong objection to the Mayor of London's proposal to designate a Mayoral Development Area (MDA) covering Oxford Street and parts of the surrounding neighbourhoods.

This proposal represents an unacceptable centralisation of power, lacks compelling justification, and ignores extensive local opposition and the precedent established in 2018 when similar plans were rightly abandoned following public consultation. It will be expensive, worse for residents and businesses than the plans developed by the local council and a distraction from solving the issues that really plague the area, namely crime and antisocial behaviour.

The following outlines some of our key concerns.

1. A Centralisation of Power at the Expense of Local Democracy

The creation of a Mayoral Development Corporation (MDC) governed by a board heavily dominated by Mayoral appointees — up to eight, compared with just three connected to Westminster and Camden — would represent a blatant dilution of democratic accountability. It moves control of the street further away from elected officials and those who live and work here and know it best. This proposal would remove critical planning powers from Westminster City Council, whose councillors are directly elected by and accountable to local residents and businesses. It would also mean abandoning the input from the residential amenity societies and others that currently have consultation rights under existing procedures.

There have been many reviews and attempts to consider the concept of pedestrianisation. In 2018, proposals were withdrawn following widespread opposition from residents, businesses, and local government representatives of all parties. Reintroducing the same strategy with no substantial changes or justification, undermines public trust in the consultation process. It gives the clear impression that the Mayor is intent on pushing through his agenda regardless of the will of the people or the integrity of local governance.



Local councillors have received dozens of messages and met with many more residents and groups who oppose this scheme and are already cynical about the value of a Mayoral consultation process they see as predetermined tick box exercise. Their objections are not based on nimbysism or the prospect of redevelopment but on the impracticality of making any scheme work, something disregarded in this process, thus far.

Furthermore, the separation of the consultation into a procedural part, which forms this consultation, and an expected second part, inevitably means that there is a lack of detail about the long-term plans and practical implementation issues have not been addressed. The inability to consider the plans as a whole is a procedural failing that increases the lack of democratic engagement and makes real democratic consent to the proposed pedestrianisation impossible.

2. Absence of Evidence

Under Section 197(3) of the Localism Act 2011, the Mayor must consider the designation of an MDA to be expedient for furthering the Greater London Authority's statutory purposes: economic development, social development, or environmental improvement. However, the current proposal provides no clear data or analysis to support the notion that an MDA is necessary. No other options have been considered. Multiple Westminster City Council reviews did consider multiple options and concluded that these plans would not work and put forward plans that would be less costly and achieve better outcomes. Given the reactions thus far, it can in fact be shown that these plans from the Mayor are actually harming the area in the short to medium term.

There is no economic modelling presented, no evidence that the existing planning framework is failing, and no serious evaluation of alternative strategies. The assertion that past development plans have failed due to "fragmented governance" does not, in itself, justify the imposition of a new top-down authority. The inclusion of a small area of Camden, notably a small stretch of Tottenham Court Road, seems to only be present to help justify the MDA working across borough boundaries rather than provide any material benefit. The plans that the Labour and Conservative administrations had put forward would have met the needs in the GLA's objectives.

3. Community Impact and Local Opposition

The proposed boundary of the MDA is illogical and insensitive to local context. The boundaries of the area to be incorporated into the MDA have been reduced considerably during the discussions to date but this will not reduce the impact of displaced activities on the communities around Oxford Street. This is why the apolitical, resident-led, amenity societies of all four districts surrounding the area (Soho, Mayfair, Marylebone and Fitzrovia) are all against this scheme.

Furthermore, in reducing the boundaries the MDA will no longer be responsible for the streets that will need to be altered and improved in order to manage the new traffic and pedestrian flows, adding to the costs to be borne by Westminster City Council and local residents. The proposed MDA will create new issues and have no obligations to manage the solutions.



There are real concerns regarding the practical impacts of proposals tied to the MDA, including the anticipated pedestrianisation of Oxford Street.

To date, there has been no credible plan presented to manage redirected traffic or mitigate its effects. Every previous study by both Labour and Conservative administrations from Westminster City Council have suggested pushing the service and public transport away from Oxford Street will increase emissions through inefficient traffic flows but there is no acknowledgment of this – even as a risk – in the documentation covering the consultation.

The associated noise and other impact factors will make life intolerable and will damage business prospects for many in the surrounding areas. How will they be compensated? None of this is adequately addressed.

4. Ignoring Local Institutions and Precedent

It is notable that the Mayor's proposal would override not only Westminster's former Conservative administration (which opposed similar plans in 2018), but also his own Labour colleagues currently in control of the Council. The suggestion that the Mayor's office is better placed to deliver economic, social, or environmental outcomes than locally elected councillors has no basis in fact.

Both Labour and Conservative administrations recognised the need to upgrade the public realm and pursue investment in the area – going beyond the street itself to consider the area as a whole; something these plans no longer do. Two versions of these proposals, with budgets around £100m, had been welcomed by businesses and residents. Those plans have now been made impossible, resulting in a substantial financial loss to the council and residents. Local businesses have withdrawn their commitments of support to be replaced with much more vague comments shown in the materials for the consultation. There is no evidence the Mayor's office has any of the funds needed to make this work and the council has given numerous undertakings that none of its funds should be used for this scheme. Plans to fund it through philanthropy seem fanciful and through increased use of public space for events are destined to harm the environment and make worse the very issues the plans are supposedly trying to address!

The new IKEA store is evidence that businesses were supporting the proposed changes and economic development was happening. These developments have ceased since the Mayor's proposals were unveiled last year as added uncertainty prevents significant commercial planning. Far from aiding Oxford Street, this exercise is actively harming its prospects.

The proposal presumes the failure of Westminster City Council's planning leadership without demonstrating why or how the Mayor would deliver superior outcomes. If the Mayor believes this to be the case, it is incumbent upon him to publish independent, transparent evidence demonstrating why such powers must be removed from local government.

The precedents for the use of MDAs have been where long-term economic revitalisation was needed following long periods of neglect and negligible activity. That's clearly not been the case for Oxford Street. This proposed MDA is not following the spirit or intended use of the legislation that enables it and we believe is open to legal challenge.



5. Lack of Detailed Proposals and Consideration for Accessibility

As highlighted by Martin Low, former City Transport Advisor at Westminster City Council, the consultation lacks detailed proposals, particularly concerning the impact on residents and businesses. The absence of comprehensive plans for traffic management, accessibility, and servicing arrangements raises significant concerns about the feasibility and desirability of the proposed changes.

Accessibility is a critical issue that has not been adequately addressed. The potential displacement of traffic and the reconfiguration of public transport routes could disproportionately affect individuals with mobility challenges, the elderly, and those reliant on public transport. Simply pushing buses further away from residents will greatly impact their quality of life whether they use Oxford Street for any other purpose or not and such harm will impact the elderly and disabled most.

6. Failure to Address Core Issues: Crime and Public Safety

The Mayor's proposal overlooks the pressing issues that visitors, residents, and businesses identify as the primary concerns affecting Oxford Street: crime, fear of crime, aggressive begging, rough sleeping, and the careless use and abandonment of e-bikes. These issues have a direct and detrimental impact on the area's appeal and safety.

Recent incidents, such as the organised shoplifting sprees and the proliferation of counterfeit goods, have highlighted the challenges faced by law enforcement and the need for increased police presence and resources. The Metropolitan Police have reported significant losses for retailers due to theft. These plans will only make worse the current issues holding back the area and without an increase in policing have the potential to lead to an end to Oxford Street as a shopping destination as has happened to so many other high streets across the country. The Mayor has not recognised any of the lessons that are so easy to glean.

The Mayor's decision to proceed with plans for the MDA comes at a time when the Metropolitan Police is facing substantial budget cuts, with reports indicating that up to 2,700 jobs are at risk due to a funding shortfall. This raises serious questions about the allocation of resources and priorities. Instead of diverting funds and attention to the establishment of a new development corporation, efforts should be concentrated on enhancing public safety and addressing the root causes of crime and antisocial behaviour on Oxford Street. That would do more to help the street than these proposals.

The Mayor is already responsible for crime and policing and should resolve those issues before embarking on this unfunded extension of his powers.

7. Inadequate Planning for Transport and Displaced Activities

The proposal to pedestrianise Oxford Street lacks a comprehensive strategy to manage the displacement of traffic and its impact on surrounding areas. The absence of detailed plans for



rerouting buses, accommodating delivery vehicles, and ensuring access for emergency services raises significant concerns about the feasibility and desirability of the proposed changes.

Moreover, the potential for increased congestion on adjacent streets, such as Wigmore Street and Mortimer Street, could exacerbate existing traffic issues and negatively affect the quality of life for residents in those areas. The lack of consideration for alternative transport routes and the impact on public transport users further underscores the need for a more thorough and inclusive planning process.

Conclusion

The Conservative Group on Westminster City Council urges the Mayor of London to withdraw this proposal and to respect both the democratic mandate of local councillors and the clear message sent by residents and businesses.

Rather than imposing an expensive, unfunded, unwanted and unaccountable governance structure, the Mayor should work in partnership with local authorities and communities to develop a coherent and inclusive vision for Oxford Street's future—one rooted in local needs, evidence, and democratic legitimacy. So much work to that end had already been completed and the Mayor could have chosen to act positively by building on that, rather than throwing it all out only to start again, wasting time and millions of pounds of taxpayers' money,

Oxford Street's regeneration is not a question of governance but of leadership, collaboration, and effective delivery. These are all things that can and should be achieved within the existing frameworks of local government and were happening until this undemocratic activity was announced.

Yours faithfully,

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Deputy Leader of the Conservative Group

On behalf of the Conservative Group, Westminster City Council