

City of Westminster

Westminster After Dark

Summary of Westminster Women's Night Safety Audit Findings

APRIL 2024

Context:

Sexual offences in Westminster fell by 5.9% between May 2022 and May 2023. While these reductions are welcome, Westminster still has some of the highest levels of sexual offences in the country.

In cases of sexual assault reported in Westminster, an estimated 39% of perpetrators are under the influence of alcohol (rising to 64% if the alleged perpetrator is a stranger to the victim). 39% of victims are under the influence of alcohol.

50% of victims of sexual offences in Westminster are aged 24 and under, and 55% of sexual offences occur during the evening and night-time, with Friday and Saturday evenings being the peak days.

52% of all sexual offences in Westminster occur within the West End and St James's wards.

The Women's Night Safety audits, conducted by Night-Time Economy Solutions, encompassed a range of methodologies, including surveys, stakeholder and street interviews, and overnight audits, to understand the experiences and perceptions of women, whether as visitors, employees, or residents.

Three audits were completed (18 March, 22 March and 20 May) from 7pm to 3am, and focused on any issues impacting safety and perceptions of women's safety. This included transportation, local services, the public realm, and the diversity of the current evening and night-time offer.

The aim of the audits were to:

- Assess the safety of women and girls
- Comprehend women's experiences
- Identify crucial safety concerns
- Provide targeted recommendations
- Promote ongoing enhancement.

Findings from the audits:

1. **Usage Patterns**: 57% of survey respondents frequented Westminster's night-time economy on weekdays, with women more likely to go out on weekday evenings. The peak time for returning home was 11 pm. Safety concerns, particularly related to violence against women and unruly behaviour, were cited by 6% of respondents as reasons for not going out at night. Westminster's evening and night-time is not overly conducive to family outings or for the elderly population. It also undergoes a significant shift in patronage during the late-night to early-morning hours where diversity wanes as the night progresses.

2. **Audit Observations:** The audits showed a thriving and diverse patronage in the early evening, with a notable presence of women, couples, and families. The audits noted an observed vibrancy and diversity of activities creating a dynamic and lively atmosphere. Large male gatherings were relatively scarce, suggesting alternative preferences for this demographic.

3. **Perceptions of Safety at Different Times**: Survey results showed that feelings of safety declined as the evening progressed, with the fastest rate of decline occurring after 9pm and the largest decline in safety perceived by female respondents after midnight. Business survey respondents felt safer working in Westminster on weekdays than on weekends,

particularly after midnight. Street interviewees had mixed feelings of safety, with the lowest reported by Westminster residents.

4. **Popular Destinations and Satisfaction Levels**: The public realm was generally viewed as welcoming and areas such as China Town and Covent Garden were commended for their unique character and potential for creating memorable moments. Restaurants, pubs/bars, cinemas/theatres, arts/music venues, and coffee/dessert places were popular. While the choice and quality of ENT offerings received positive feedback, only 37% expressed satisfaction with safety. 30% of female respondents wanted to see more activities with a no-alcohol focus as there was a general feeling of a lack of diverse activities offered at night.

5. **Transportation Findings**: Buses were the most common mode of transport into Westminster during nighttime, followed by walking, the tube, and taxis. Safety perceptions varied across transport modes, with private vehicles perceived as the safest option (73%). There is an absence of clearly defined taxi ranks or designated pick-up points which may mean individuals are pushed into less well-lit areas to wait for transportation.

6. **Lighting and Safety Features**: The audit found inconsistent lighting throughout Westminster. Some areas had poor lighting, while others, like Regent Street and Carnaby Street, showcased effective lighting solutions. Inadequate lighting in areas like Victoria/Strand and Leicester Square posed safety concerns, particularly for women navigating these poorly lit spaces at night. Unnecessary telephone boxes were found to be open, potentially obstructing views and impacting safety. ASB and public urination linked to the absence of adequate public toilet facilities for females were noted as significant concerns. 35% of respondents named CCTV as a factor that would make them feel safer in Westminster at night, and 39% of businesses interviewed said CCTV would make them feel safer too.

7. **Voluntary and Healthcare Presence**: The absence of a visible voluntary or healthcare presence was notable during the night audits. The closure of resources like the Night Hub at St Anne's Church Hall, especially on Saturdays, could hinder individuals seeking assistance. There was also a lack of clear signposting for support services like the Night Stars and Street Pastors, raising questions about the visibility and accessibility of these crucial services. Increased police presence and improved safety were top priorities for enhancing the appeal of Westminster's ENT offer.