

Westminster parking charges attacked by galleries, theatres and mayor

Council plan to extend parking charges to evenings and weekends heavily criticised by Boris Johnson and arts groups

Mark Brown, arts correspondent
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Westminster council plans to extend parking charges to evenings and weekends have been criticised by arts organisations and London's mayor. Photograph: Chris Young/PA

Some of the UK's biggest cultural organisations have weighed into the row over Westminster council's plan to extend central London parking charges into evenings and weekends, warning it will have a significant impact on audience numbers and revenues at the worst possible time.

In a letter published in the Guardian, the heads of eight organisations including the Royal Opera House, the V&A and the National Portrait Gallery, urge Westminster council to "reconsider policies which will have such a detrimental effect on the success of cultural organisations in Westminster and the economy of London in general".

Westminster is planning to introduce charges of up to £4.40 an hour from 6.30pm to midnight Monday to Saturday and 1pm to 6pm on Sundays.

The political reaction has been fierce. The London mayor, Boris Johnson, called it "completely mad" while the Liberal Democrat transport minister, Norman Baker, said they were close to vindictive: "You might even say that they constitute a war on the motorist."

Now museums and theatres have weighed in. One signatory, Tate director, Sir Nicholas Serota, said: "I'm sure it will enormously discourage people, particularly families, from visiting museums."

His sentiments were echoed by Julian Bird, chief executive officer of the Society of London Theatres, who said its objections were based on fact, not emotions, and had not been listened to by the council.

The last survey, he said, showed that just over 17% of theatre audiences travelled by car and for those over 55 it was above 20%, with the reasons more about access and security, rather than public transport. "It is a fact that if you change that model it will be very detrimental. We fundamentally believe this is a bad decision for our businesses

across the West End."

"We feel there are facts that are not being considered in the council's consultation and decision making, they have not paid sufficient heed to feedback from businesses.

"Theatres sell around £500m of tickets every year and that translates in to well north of £2bn economic spend and most of that is spent in Westminster. This is huge business for the part of London that Westminster council controls and we just don't think that's being listened to and thought about. We're not the only ones saying it – everyone is saying it."

He would like to see a change of heart. "We would like nothing better than to sit round the table and discuss it but as far as we're concerned this is a genuinely bad decision for London and Londoners, full stop. Particularly in this economic environment, why do anything that puts people off coming in to the West End?" Westminster council has denied it is a money-making scheme and, legally, it is not permitted to introduce parking measures purely to generate revenue. It says it is intended to ease congestion in the West End.

The leader of Westminster council, Colin Barrow, last month wrote in the Guardian:

"The objective is reducing congestion, providing space for those who need it, and helping the city work better for the benefit of all."

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