

## What does better look like?

# #BUILD BACK BETTER

As we have recently been experiencing, the pandemic has accelerated many trends that were already in train prior to the onset of Covid 19. This included more of us working from home (occasionally), emerging digital innovations, a growing focus on physical and mental well-being and the exponential growth of online retail, all having an effect on what customers want from the high street, and how physical stores engage with their customers. Our response to this now, must be multi-faceted when it comes to the built environment and ought to address the key challenges we are facing as a society.

We all know there are now real opportunities to 'Build Back Better' but who will be brave enough to take the decision to do that, and what does 'Better' look like?

In 'Strategy, Investment and Policy for a strong and sustainable recovery: An action plan' published by LSE, they warn that any pandemic induced recession must not mean a return to austerity. They argue that we should focus on, amongst other things, investing in productivity- enhancing sustainable infrastructure projects that create more liveable cities, cleaner air and the resulting improvements to wellbeing for all inhabitants. This would include retrofitting buildings to make them more resilient and sustainable, investing in research and development of clean innovation, restoring land, planting trees, managing water resources, reducing air pollution and expanding green spaces.

So, it is interesting to see how The Crown Estate has been responding to the pandemic in Central London. They have been quietly creating their best post pandemic welcome back to the West End for its many visitors and people who work and live in this central part of London. They want to help their customers by creating a safer shopping environment, giving confidence that there will be enough space to enable social distancing. By prioritising

pedestrians, they are able to achieve many wider benefits that certainly seem to achieve the goal of 'Better'.



'Building Back Better' and creating a legacy appear to be at the forefront of this project with the vision for a greener, safer, cleaner and more accessible West End. The interim plan, is to improve the public realm by increasing the width of the pavements thereby reducing the carriageways for vehicles, introducing seating for people, improving cycling provision,

enhancing the bus stops and planting trees and greenery along its length, so boosting biodiversity and improving air quality. Reducing emissions and improving air quality is a key aspiration for this project. These plans will be in place for an initial 18 month period while The Crown Estate welcome feedback, and learn more about what works well, in order to continue evolving this important destination.

Set to complete before Christmas, it will be interesting to see how these interim improvements change the local environment and the behaviours of those who live, work and visit the area. Strong collaboration between Westminster City Council, Transport for London and The Crown Estate coupled with strong leadership and vision is the only way a project like this can be delivered. As a minimum this project will help generate data to inform future projects enabling evidence-based decision making, based on real events and outcomes. Better than this though, it can help reshape future decisions, enabling us to collectively rethink our city centres in response to the climate crisis, whilst creating innovative, inspiring, accessible and secure spaces and places for all of us.

This is what 'Better' should look like, and The Crown Estate is brave in its ambition to give Londoners something to look forward to in 2021