

Dear Supporter,

Thanks for getting in touch.

Please send your email to the leader of Westminster City Council, Adam Hug: leader@westminster.gov.uk

And to ensure that your email is considered as part of the consultation, please also CC: lighting@westminster.gov.uk

Here are some ideas for your letter. Please personalise it and say what the gas lamps mean to you. Of course you don't have to agree with every part of what we say (or use it all), but we want you to have accurate information.

Please note that The London Gasketeers have the backing of heritage experts Dan Cruickshank and Charles Saumarez Smith; heritage bodies The Victorian Society and Historic Buildings & Places; local amenity groups such as Seven Dials Trust and Covent Garden Community Association; the GMB Union (this is also about the survival of jobs and skills); 6th generation gas engineer Chris Sugg, and concerned individuals, such as Adam Dant, Simon Callow and Griff Rhys Jones (president, The Victorian Society and president, Civic Voice). You are in good company!

In brief:

- Gas street lighting began in Westminster (Pall Mall, 1807), the first street anywhere to be illuminated by gas. The Council has a special responsibility to preserve working examples of this technology here.

The council has presented a superficially plausible spread of justifications for a decision which has all the hallmarks of having been made already. They say that:

- i) The lamps are being replaced 'like for like' and will be indistinguishable from the originals (they are not, even the variety of lamps cannot be replicated).
- ii) There is a lack of spare parts (there are plenty. The specialist team of British Gas lamplighters were not even approached for comment).
- iii) The gas lamps cost too much (the council's own figures are £26k per year maintenance plus a £120k gas bill, but the replacement scheme costs £3million).

- iv) The tiny handful of gas lamps make some of Westminster's most popular streets unsafe (we dispute this entirely).
- v) The council are unable to install additional LED lighting to supplement gas where this might be useful (we have yet to hear a good reason why not).
- vi) Getting rid of the gas lamps will help tackle the climate emergency (they account for 0.0088% of carbon emissions in Westminster overall).
- There has been a lack of appropriate consultation, including with the relevant statutory bodies. Even the council's current 'consultation' did not ask the most straightforward question: should we keep the gas lamps or not? We are not interested in political point scoring, but we do care about local democracy. It may be that the council never thought that gas lamps could arouse such strong feelings, but if enough of us take a stand we believe Westminster Council will think again.

In full:

I oppose Westminster City Council's plans to convert its remaining 275 (or so) working gas lamps to electricity, which means discarding the entire original lantern and replacing it with an antique-style lantern and a 'gas-effect' LED.

Gas street lighting began in Westminster in 1807 and revolutionised urban living worldwide. Westminster Council has a special duty to preserve working examples of this technology for future generations, on the street where everyone can enjoy them. London is a world city. The heritage belongs to all of us, and the destruction of any part of it should not be within the mandate of Westminster Council alone. The beauty and historical significance of the gas lamps outweighs Westminster Council's justifications for removing them.

Westminster Council has claimed that the lamps are being replaced 'like for like' and will be indistinguishable from the originals. (At best, this would present its own set of problems in terms of conservation best practice: the replica gas-pipes and timers have never formed part of a functioning lamp.) However, most significantly, with only three basic LED-powered prototypes, the council is unable to replicate either scarce models (such as rare passage lamps) or even the full variety of more familiar examples, such as the "Windsor"-style lamps, made by a number of manufacturers, in different sizes, over a long period. There has been little attempt to replicate the decorative details, due (we have been told) to copyright issues.

Moreover, it is unlawful to destroy or alter listed heritage assets without listed building consent. We are concerned that the council has failed in its duty to engage appropriately with the relevant Statutory Bodies, and we are aware of lamps which may already have been removed illegally, the early "Windsor-style" bracket lamp removed from a Grade II* property in Pickering Place (which has not been replaced) being a notable example.

Spending 3 million pounds to replace 275 distinctive original working gas lights is a complete waste of public money, which even the most optimistic council assessments suggest won't generate a return for taxpayers for 13 years. Even if we accept the council's own figures (annual maintenance of £26,000 and a gas bill of £120,000 per annum) in today's tough economic context that capital outlay is entirely inappropriate, however it is accounted for. And there is no reason to assume that gas prices will reach £120,000 and stay there; based on updated figures by the ONS, the revised estimated energy prices for next year will be the same as last year at £75,000.

Westminster Council claims that "Gas lamps currently produce 200 tonnes of carbon per year. That's the equivalent of 40 return flights from London to Sydney". This represents 0.44% of Westminster Council's own emissions of 45,000 tonnes- based on the council's 2018/19 figures- and as little as 0.0088% of the 2,276,000 tonnes of carbon emissions in Westminster overall. The same impact could be achieved by switching off 40 patio heaters. Taken out of context, 40 return flights sounds like a big number, but, according to 1map.com, there are currently 51 flights from London to Sydney per day, and 358 per week. And Sydney is one long-haul destination among many. It is absurd to suggest that converting the lamps is part of 'saving the planet' Instead, the council should be prioritising actions which tackle the most emissions in accordance with its own Climate Emergency Action Plan.

Very little thought seems to have been given to the increased use of either hydrogen or biogas, which are both attracting significant investment. Meanwhile, at least 35% of our electricity is generated using gas. We cannot tell where we will be in 20 years time, but there is no pressing reason to rush into anything.

In terms of public safety (and meeting current British Standards) the lamps are mostly in well-trodden streets augmented by other ambient light sources. The lamps themselves can be brightened, for example using reflectors, and I would support the introduction of sympathetic additional LED lighting where absolutely necessary: I have yet to hear of a specific instance where listed building status or complex underground infrastructure made it impossible to do so (and it certainly could not be true of all locations). We might not make the lamps that way now, but that's true of many historic things we preserve, from listed buildings to vintage cars - and we make exemptions for them. Re-using what we have inherited is often the greenest thing we can do.

Westminster Council has previously claimed that there is a lack of spare parts, and it is impossible to keep this old technology running indefinitely. It has become clear that the specialist team of British Gas lamplighters was not even consulted by the council. The maintenance team of British Gas lamplighters, alongside private firms restoring gas lighting, have the skills and spare parts to adapt into the future but only if their livelihoods and specialist knowledge are not lost. Preserving a viable number of lamps is critical. If the real problem is a lack of dialogue between the council and its contractors, that cannot be allowed to destroy our heritage.

Westminster Council has to try harder. Gas lamps were once a cherished asset, and there are still walking tours of Westminster by gas-light. Other UK authorities (such as Malvern) make a feature of their lamps for the benefit of residents and to attract tourists. Gas lamps- some of which had been disconnected since the war- have recently been reconnected at Westminster Abbey: their maintenance remains the responsibility of Westminster Council. Overseas, after a 17 year absence, gas lamps were reintroduced to Prague in 2002: there are now 600 of them. In Phoenix Park, Dublin, 224 lamps contribute to the park's status as a dark skies oasis (gas lamps were originally intended to mimic sunlight, and are also good for wildlife).

Replicas are not the answer, and the current council consultation merely invites participants to admire the new LED lanterns. The council has spent so long justifying why the gas lamps should go that they have overlooked the many reasons why they must stay. Nobody who lives or works in Westminster, or who visits this remarkable place, does so because it is bland and uniform. The council are custodians of something very special and I urge you to reconsider this disastrous and unpopular policy.