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THE TIMES

BUSINESS

West End faces long road back as shoppers stay home

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Fear of catching coronavirus has made shoppers and revellers stay away from London's West End, as footfall was more than a quarter lower than pre-pandemic levels during what should be one of the busiest trading days of the year.

Visitor numbers were 27 per cent lower on Tuesday compared with the same day in 2019, according to the New West End Company, which represents hundreds of businesses.

Jace Tyrrell, chief executive of New West End Company, said: "Once again we are seeing fewer customers on the high street than there were two years ago. Retail and leisure businesses will have spent significant amounts of time and money preparing for a busy Christmas period, only for people to understandably stay at home in the face of rising Covid rates."

In a separate survey published this week by UK Hospitality, the industry body, just over 50 per cent of venues around the country reported a drop in revenue of at least 40 per cent for last weekend, while 20 per cent said revenues had fallen by more than 60 per cent.

Earlier this week the chancellor announced a

[£1 billion support package for hospitality](#)

businesses, including one-off grants of up to £6,000 per premises to compensate for the collapse of Christmas bookings. The grants will be distributed by councils, with an extra £100 million to be handed out at their discretion.

The government will also cover the costs of staff absences by reimbursing small and medium-sized employers for statutory sick pay of up to two weeks per worker.

However, more financial assistance is needed, Tyrrell said. "We must see tangible relief for the retail industry, alongside more substantial measures for leisure businesses. Otherwise we run the risk of more much-loved brands being forced to close in the coming months."

A two-thirds reduction on business rates for retail, hospitality and leisure business will also come to an end on March 31.

"Many of our shops and restaurants face an uncertain Christmas and a precarious new year . . . That's why I have written to the chancellor urging him to consider more flexible grants and continued business rate relief to help revive the economy of central London," Rachael Robathan, leader of Westminster city council, said.

Related Images



Oxford Street in London yesterday. Visitor numbers to the West End were 27 per cent lower on Tuesday compared with the same day in 2019
Ian West/PA

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