

LIBERAL DEMOCRAT SUBMISSION TO THE VISION 2030 CONSULTATION.

Summary

- Islington Liberal Democrats welcome the aims and broad ambition of the Islington Vision 2030.
- This consultation response builds on the pioneering approach to climate change shown by the Liberal Democrat-led administration in Islington in the 2000s and by Liberal Democrat ministers in the 2010-2015 coalition. It is Liberal Democrat policy to give local authorities fully-funded statutory powers requiring them to produce zero carbon plans and programmes.
- The Vision 2030 document has lots of good ideas, but the articulation of the “Vision” and the “success criteria” lacks substance and clarity.
- The immediate priority is to implement post-pandemic traffic mitigation measures that will improve air quality and reduce emissions. We support the broad objectives of People-Friendly Streets, but want to see clear quantified targets for air quality.
- Longer term, we believe there should be clear targets for emissions reductions linked to the various actions identified in the document, together with overall aggregate targets for Scope 1 and Scope 2 emissions. These targets should be regularly monitored and reported publicly. Only then will we be able to tell whether the goal of net zero is being achieved.
- All proposals should be costed and, where the Council is seeking central government support, the extent of the funding required should be spelt out.
- There should be transparency about the implications for residents, both in privately-owned properties and social housing accommodation, including the potential impact on energy bills.
- The coverage of the vision should be expanded to include waste management and conservation area policies.
- Cross-party collaboration will be essential for the delivery of the Net Zero Vision, together with widespread involvement of community groups and the general public. The Liberal Democrats stand ready to co-operate fully in this crucial shared endeavour.

Islington Liberal Democrats (ILD) views on the Vision 2030 Consultation

1. Who we are:

ILD is a local branch of the national Liberal Democrat party, with a membership of approximately 1,000 Islington residents. Our members are drawn from all walks of life. Many of us are involved in community life and in actions in support of Islington residents. A recent example of this is our widespread involvement in the Mutual Aid efforts in response to the COVID crisis.

2. Our environmental record:

The Liberal Democrats have a long and proud history of environmental innovation and pro-green policies locally and nationally. The 2019 Liberal Democrat election manifesto included a specific commitment to creating a fully-funded statutory duty on local authorities to produce zero carbon strategies. And in that spirit, we welcome the aims and broad ambition of the Islington 2030 strategy.

In Islington in the 2000's, the Liberal Democrat-led council pioneered a broad range of environmental policies. It appointed the council's first Sustainability Manager and set up a Sustainability Scrutiny Committee, chaired by Labour, so that the opposition could hold the administration to account. The Liberal Democrats introduced sustainable construction, car-free housing and green roofs. We pioneered the biomass central heating project that became the Bunhill Energy Centre. We produced detailed Air Quality and Biodiversity Action Plans and set up a Climate Change Partnership, backed by a £3M climate change fund. We also encouraged people to get out of their cars and walk or cycle instead. Our transport measures were controversial at the time, arousing sometimes bitter opposition. A decade later, such measures have become accepted as the norm.

In national government (2010-15) we capitalised on the Labour Government's 2008 Climate Change Act to introduce progressive environmental measures. Renewables, especially wind power, were aggressively promoted: due to our start-up support, the market megawatt hour cost of wind power came down from a prohibitive £140 to a very competitive £40. Other measures included the creation of a Green Investment Bank. As a result, UK carbon emissions have fallen the furthest of any major European economy over the last decade, though much more needs to be done if we are to push on to net zero.

3. Short-term crisis response:

The immediate response to the current COVID crisis has seen an impressive mobilisation of interested groups across Islington, with the objective of harnessing the response to the myriad challenges posed by the pandemic to help build a more environmentally-sustainable Islington. While many of the actions have had explicitly short-term goals, the longer-term

climate change impacts have also been central concerns for many Islington residents. This has certainly been a major part of the thinking behind the ILD approach to the crisis. We have engaged with many local action and campaign groups, notably Islington Clean Air Parents (ICAP), Cycle Islington (CI) and Extinction Rebellion (XR).

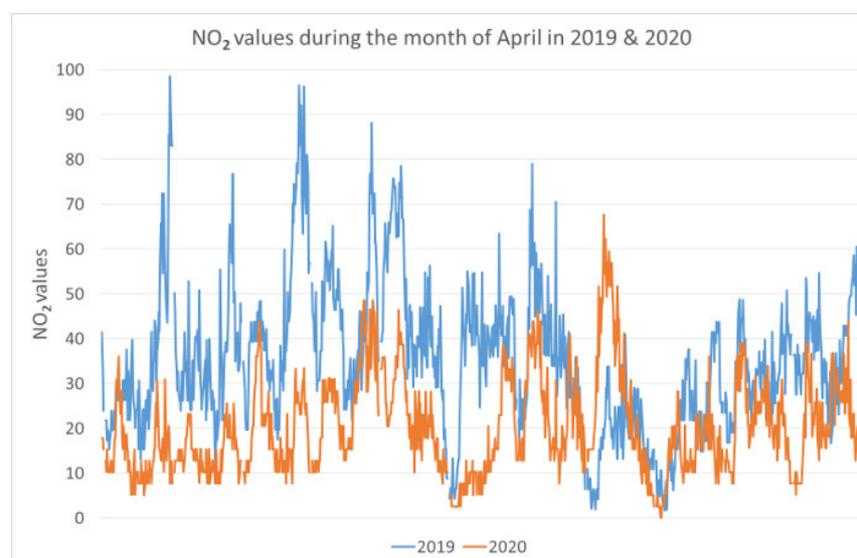
Since the crisis broke in March 2020, ILD has advocated a focus on creating space for people as a priority. These ideas are designed to offer a coherent approach to active travel that complements and enhances the Council's own People Friendly Street's approach. They embrace:

- Greater space for people on foot (especially during but not limited to times of social distancing measures);
- Increased provision for people on bicycles, especially the creation of a coherent continuous cycling network as well as increased cycle parking facilities;
- More seating for people to relax and spend more time outdoors but also to allow people to rest and relax outdoors. Linked to this, the reopening (mid-July 2020) of public toilets is a necessary and welcome step forward.

These measures encouraging active non-car travel should, if sustained, have a demonstrable long-term impact on Islington's carbon footprint.

Improving air quality should be a key 'benchmark' measure, against which all environmental efforts should be evaluated. One of the few benefits to come out of the pandemic tragedy is that we have now experienced cleaner air and what it means, how it feels. As the illustration shows, rather than being a wished-for, unattainable pipe dream, it has been a reality and we know what is needed to maintain it.

ILLUSTRATION: NO₂ READINGS IN HOLLOWAY ROAD, LAST TEN DAYS OF APRIL 2019 COMPARED WITH SAME PERIOD IN 2020. (Source: Londonair.org.uk)



Of course, sustained long-term air quality improvement is not easy, and cannot be achieved by Islington or even London alone, but we believe a commitment should and can be made. In this respect it was disappointing to hear Islington's Council Leader, having earlier pledged to focus on maintaining good air quality, seemingly dismiss the goal of keeping air quality levels to below pre-pandemic levels, on the grounds that, post-lockdown, car usage was bound to rise again (Council meeting, July 9, 2020). There is no chance of achieving the ambitions of Vision 2030 – nor of People Friendly Streets - if the Council takes a defeatist attitude on such a crucial point.

We therefore call upon the Council to publish ambitious but achievable targets for air quality backed by determined, relentless policy and actions.

4. Defining the Vision:

The Council's declared vision is: '*Creating a clean and green Islington in response to the Climate Emergency*' (p15). (Given what has happened in the short time since the document's publication, we would add the words: '*... and actioning the lessons and experience of the COVID pandemic*'.)

Naturally, we subscribe to that vision, such as it is. But herein lies its problem - it is so general, so unspecific that it is effectively meaningless. It fails to point a way ahead; to frame the choices that must be made.

It would have been more tangible, more meaningful, more a call to action, to state the substance of that vision, i.e.: '*Making Islington carbon neutral by 2030*'.

Admittedly this is controversial and may provoke disagreement, but it has substance; it is a rallying call and gives us something to strive for.

Take the Liberal Democrat position which is that the UK will be carbon-neutral by 2045. We believe this is the earliest realistically achievable date according to our grounded, detailed plans. We worry that setting earlier impossible deadlines builds in failure and a sense of disillusion and therefore negativity around the prospects for climate change.

However, Islington is not the UK as a whole; and we will willingly do all we can to collaborate and work in order to hit that 2030 date, or to be close to it. But such an ambition must be backed by a realistic plan.

5. Success criteria:

Perhaps an indistinct vision doesn't matter so long as there is precision about clarifying actions that flow from it. While there are a number of specific actions listed at the end of each Priority section, the overall '*What success will look like*' passage (p16) in the Council 'Vision' section is disappointingly vague.

Only the first of the success criteria - “*Emissions from gas boilers and vehicles are eliminated*” - carries a clear target (i.e. 100% elimination).

Others lack this clarity of purpose, using phrasing such as: ‘*as efficient as possible*’; ‘*is maximised*’; ‘*other methods*’; ‘*residents...carbon literate...adept in how to reduce...*’.

The language of this section should be tightened up: it needs defined actions to achieve defined targets that will materially contribute to the vision of Islington achieving net zero by 2030.

6. Quantifying emissions reductions:

In the section ‘*Defining Zero Carbon*’ (pp19-26), Vision 2030 attempts an overview of the challenge of decarbonising Islington by 2030. It identifies carbon emissions by sectors and looks at reduction scenarios towards 2030 and 2050. It also points out the difficulty of counting carbon emissions. This section also highlights the risks and challenges of tackling carbon emissions. These challenges are significant.

For each of the six sectors or priorities, Vision 2030 lists what the Council:

- can commit to immediately and actions it will take;
- sees as potential commitments, but requires further investigation before committing to;
- needs from others in order for the borough achieve net zero, including funding, powers and legislation.

This is a useful way of organising the different actions proposed. But, unfortunately, there is no indication as to what impact each proposed measure will achieve in terms of emission reductions.

The consultation paper states: “*Achieving the net zero carbon target will mean reducing Scope 1 and 2 emissions as far as possible and offsetting any remaining emissions*” (p20). This phrasing (“*as far as possible*”) introduces considerable ambiguity about its ambition for emissions reduction, as well as introducing convenient wriggle-room to compensate for any failures to achieve significant emissions reductions through vague, and probably unrealistic, offsetting strategies.

We can understand that the Council is cautious in setting targets on carbon emissions it does not entirely control. This is especially true in the case of Scope 3 emissions. However, Council actions will significantly impact the pace of reduction in Scope 1 and 2 emissions, i.e. emissions controlled or significantly influenced by the Council (p7). It is therefore disappointing that the Council does not commit to specific numerical targets for Scope 1 and 2 emissions linked to a clear timetable. In the absence of clear, quantified emissions reductions targets linked to the actions under each priority, it is impossible to say one way or the other whether, in fact, Vision 2030 will deliver a zero-carbon Islington by 2030. We

find this approach over-cautious and counter-productive. A call to action without a road-map risks a false sense that actions are being taken. Disillusion and a break-up of current broad support can easily follow.

7. Funding and Resources

Any plans and timetables, as well as defining what is to be done, require necessary resources to be identified. Vision 2030 (p28) stresses that the Council does not have the money to do independently everything that is needed. Central government must step in.

We entirely acknowledge this reality of British society. We also deplore it. It is an emasculation of local democracy. It is a regrettable fact that all central governments since the Thatcher era have deliberately weakened and diminished local authority. The 2019 Liberal Democrat manifesto had a specific commitment to reverse this trend, with a pledge to “*Create a statutory duty on all local authorities to produce a Zero Carbon Strategy, including plans for local energy, transport and land use, and devolve powers and funding to enable every council to implement it*” (p41).

Students of local politics will recall Labour councillors lamenting from the Council chamber floor in the late nineties that the (then newly-elected) Labour Government was, in spite of expectations, ‘no financial white knight’ for local Councils. The ruthless ‘passported’ funding used by Labour central government, with its predilection for Private Finance Initiatives, further eroded the financial independence and the authority of local Councils.

More recently, the continued cuts and squeeze, long after the financial crisis of 2010 was brought under control, shows a similar doctrinaire distrust of local democracy. So, we sympathise with the present Council’s predicament. However, ‘we are where we are’ and we also believe the COVID crisis provides an opportunity. The massive government spending to deal with the crisis itself and to shield the economy and jobs can be a precedent for the environment. Tragic and damaging as the pandemic is proving to be, its consequences are minor compared to what will happen to us all if the climate emergency is not addressed.

Thus, quoting Vision 2030, “*The council will particularly need the government to make significant and on- going funding, including capital grant funding in order to deliver our ambition for Islington. Specifically, the cost of retrofitting the council’s housing stock to become both energy efficient and zero carbon in terms of energy is well in excess of what the Council can afford. This also applies to private housing and social housing provided by other organisations*” (p30).

In order to make a compelling case, the Council needs urgently to quantify its funding needs: make a plan, with actions and timetables, defining what is to be achieved. And then cost out the needed funding that only central government can provide. It might be possible -

and is certainly worth exploring - to achieve collaboration with other councils in London and with the London Mayor in order to present an unanswerable case.

Even so, such funding may well be rejected by central Government. While this would be awful, we will all at least then know where the responsibility lies and a reduced programme should be adopted accordingly. Better that than to seem to accuse, to blame others without substantiating the case.

Also, the Council should be honest about the implications for us all. For example, the shift away from the use of gas in domestic heating and cooking and its replacement by electricity (p40) is potentially disruptive for local householders. The impact will be felt across both privately-owned and social housing accommodation. There will inevitably be resistance to change and concerns about possible increased costs to bill-payers. Has the Council or Angelic Energy conducted an assessment on the likely impact on consumer electricity bills as a result of this recommendation? What mitigating measures does the Council propose?

8. Additional actions the Council should and can take independently:

Notwithstanding the need for central Government support in some areas, we urge the Council to do all it can in those areas under its control. As stated above, this means setting clear priorities, linked to quantified emissions reduction targets, instead of the non-committal "*The council will need to develop business cases for investment in order to reduce carbon emissions*" (p30).

These actions would include tackling the direct emissions of the Council and the services that it runs such as housing and waste management. Indeed, more attention should be given to waste treatment and to plastic waste in particular. This is an area on which Islington has influence and on which the current 2030 net zero policy is very unclear. It seems that the majority of the emissions associated with Islington's waste are not counted in the emissions inventory as they take place outside the borough boundaries at the incinerator at Edmonton EcoPark. This seems to be a major oversight and they should be counted in the emissions under the influence of the Council in the way that the Council's social housing is covered. If necessary, an agreement should be reached with Enfield Borough Council to ensure that double-counting of emissions is avoided.

In addition to the actions already listed in Vision 2030, the Scope 1 and 2 emissions reduction plan should also include targets for:

- the electrification of the council and any outside contractor transport fleet
- differentiation of the cost of parking permits depending on the emissions of vehicles
- the installation of electric vehicle charging infrastructure
- the replacement of any gas in district heat network with renewable energy. Zero carbon district heating in 2030 should be an objective of the strategy.

There are additional actions that the council could take to reduce emissions. For example, Vision 2030 fails to address fully policies relating to Conservation Areas (50% of the borough) and gives no additional guidance to their sustainable development. The Council should commit to reviewing its conservation area guidance to support zero carbon policies, so supporting sensitively designed solid wall insulation, double- and triple-glazed conservation windows as well as permitting well-designed extensions that improve energy efficiency (e.g. super insulated mansard roofs) and the sensitive installation of renewable energy.

9. Collaboration

ILD believe the climate emergency is so serious that the response needs a genuine collaboration and a pooling of minds and resources. It is a collective community issue, not one belonging to any single entity. The COVID crisis and the heart-warming response of Islington people from all walks of life shows what we can do when we work together.

We call on the Labour Council to collaborate in this fashion as the borough works to achieve net zero. It surely remembers that its mega-dominance of the Council owes as much to our distorted electoral system as to its own innate popularity. It is easy - and doubtless tempting - to overlook this stark fact: Labour has 47 of 48 councillors, yet 40% of votes cast in 2018 were for parties other than Labour. In other words, nearly half of Islington voters are denied a voice.

In recent times, the Liberal Democrats have reaffirmed themselves as Islington's second political party (see the European Parliament and General Election results of 2019). In addition, the Green Party has the sole opposition councillor in Islington. We believe Labour should work consciously cross-party and with cross-interest groups to achieve results they cannot realistically reach alone.

We would look forward to such consensual collaboration in the interests of a clean and green Islington.

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