

Response to Camden Cyclists and London Living Streets active travel asks

April 2018, Sian Berry, Camden Green Party

Thank you for giving us the chance to respond to your election asks. The importance and potential of active travel - both walking and cycling - for making Camden a better place to live cannot be overstated.

Your document says: "Active travel is a key element in improving Camden's atrocious air quality and at a personal level can reduce a person's risk of obesity and many chronic diseases as well as improving their mental health and well-being," and you are completely right to highlight the many benefits outside getting around more easily and cheaply that making active travel easier can give our citizens. As a borough we are only just beginning to appreciate the damage that traffic through our communities is causing, and the need to move away from car travel in a more planned and strategic way.

Greens in Highgate ward were the first group in Camden to do 'citizen science' to measure local air pollution in 2013, and this is now being done by groups all over the borough and putting filthy air near the top of the council's agenda. We have criticised the council, though, for not setting short-term as well as long-term targets for reducing pollution, so they can be held accountable, and we have pointed out that targets for traffic reduction are also needed.

We are therefore very pleased to see your ask for a clear target to reduce the number of car trips through Camden by a third by the end of the next council term, and by half by 2026. This is completely achievable with the right policies and political will, and we are happy to sign up to this.

The measures we would take to achieve this goal include developing a Workplace Parking Levy, and working with businesses to reduce van travel and make deliveries more efficient while using more zero-carbon methods to move goods around. This is in addition to making it easier for our own residents to walk and cycle.

A Workplace Parking Levy (an annual licence fee for off-street workplace parking spaces) has been successful in Nottingham and is within the powers of Camden Council - either alone or working with other boroughs. It would be a clear and effective way to reduce demand for unnecessary car travel in our borough. According to the 2011 Census, nearly 25,000 people drive each day to their workplace in Camden, and nearly 22,000 of these people live outside the borough. Many others drive through our borough to workplaces in Westminster, Islington and the City of London, which is why we would attempt to make this a multi-borough initiative.

The levy would raise funds that would diminish over time as the policy took effect, but all proceeds would be ring-fenced to improve our streets for walking and cycling. This would create a virtuous circle and enable us to achieve more quickly the second of your asks, which is to develop a safe, comfortable and accessible borough-wide cycling network within eight years.

We have some good examples of safer cycling routes in Camden but they have been hard fought. We would develop this network as quickly as possible, working with cycling groups, schools, parents and local groups such as neighbourhood forums, and would make the most of the opportunities coming from new developments to increase budgets. New areas for development such as the Kentish Town industrial areas have huge potential to include completely traffic free cycling routes, as well as exemplary public realm, following healthy streets principles.

You ask us to set a target of 50 per cent of people who would like to cycle in Camden able to take it up, wherever they live and whatever their age or ability, and the cycling potential maps from TfL that you have highlighted show clearly that almost every route to our schools and town centres is very high in this potential. The large number of schools in Camden makes it even more important that we achieve your goal of the network being suitable for 12 year olds to use for independent travel. The Greens have consistently campaigned for cycling to be made safe and appealing for those from 8 to 80 (and above) to use bikes to get around.

The Mayor of London is inviting ambitious bids for Liveable Neighbourhood funding, with grants available of up to £10 million per project. Your final ask is for us to “Develop and submit at least one Liveable Neighbourhood bid for an area in Camden that has high potential for walking and cycling.” Our view is that we absolutely must make the most of this new funding stream from the Mayor, and that yes we should develop a priority area but also three, four, five or more further areas with written-up plans to do this.

With the Neighbourhood Forum in Dartmouth Park, where I am a Green councillor, I have visited Waltham Forest to see the way the whole area, including main roads, residential streets, former rat-runs and smaller shopping streets, has been transformed by the mini-Holland investment. We must be making similar plans for more of Camden’s local areas, working from the start with local communities to come up with ideas and get the details right. Starting to plan these schemes now will help get them ready for funding from whatever source is available, whether that’s from our Green Assembly Member, Caroline Russell, succeeding in increasing the Mayor’s budget for these projects (as she has proposed in GLA budget amendments) or from local income from our proposed Workplace Parking Levy or developer contributions.

Related to this ambition is support for Camden’s local high streets and community facilities, to ensure that residents can access daily necessities within a 20-minute walk of their home. The loss of independent shops and businesses on many of our high streets and the council’s recent moves to concentrate community facilities, such as drop-in centres, into fewer, bigger venues, are a detriment to active travel because they push people into cars or onto public transport. The Green Party would challenge this trend with policies that support local jobs, shopping and essential services within walking or cycling distance, with the aim of strengthening our neighbourhoods and communities too.

I hope this reply answers your questions, but please get in touch if anything needs clarification. Camden Greens are fully committed to making our borough the most welcoming for active travel in London and transforming the lives, health and wellbeing of our citizens.