Rethinking Green Transitions

A youth-led peer research project in Islington

"It is vital that young people's experiences and priorities shape the decisions being made about London's future. The green transition should reflect the voices of those who will inherit its consequences."

Maryam Jimale, Maanya Jones, Joseph Rees and Maddy Westhead,
Young researchers on the Rethinking Green Transitions research team

Photography © Catarina Heeckt and the Re-thinking Green Transitions team

Our approach
LSE Cities, Islington Council and young people in Islington

For London's green transition to be just and sustainable, it must be shaped by the lived experiences and priorities of all Londoners, especially young people who are often underrepresented in urban policy debates.

This project aims to understand the following:

1. What do young people want from green transitions?

2. How can policymakers work better with young people to put their visions and values at the heart of London's green future?

This project defines the green transition as the journey towards social and environmental sustainability, ensuring liveable cities and a liveable planet for all.

Four young people from Islington, two policy officers from Islington Council, and a researcher at LSE Cities have worked together in an experimental peer-research format to explore these questions. Peer research is a participatory research method in which people with lived experience of the issues being studied take part in directing and conducting the research.

We co-designed research questions, methods and outputs – providing our young researchers with training along the way with the support of Partnership for Young London. Combining the expertise of young researchers and policymakers meant the research stayed relevant both to young people in Islington and to the council's ongoing policy and engagement work.

Between December 2024 and May 2025, our young researchers led conversations with 42 of their peers (aged 16 to 26 years) and 20 policymakers from the council through interviews, focus groups and a workshop. We also co-designed a survey which reached 116 young people in the borough, and experimented with creative methods like photography, film and walking around the borough to explore Islington's changing streets.

Our findings

Early in our research, the research team decided that Islington Council's Liveable Neighbourhoods (LNs) programme was a helpful starting point for discussions about the green transition. This programme aims to make Islington's neighbourhoods greener, healthier, fairer and more welcoming places. This is partly done by re-allocating street space from traffic to green and social space.

Many policymakers think their work on this programme is aimed at young people, as Mathew Bonomi, Head of Transport Projects at Islington Council, says:

"When we plant trees, we're not planting them for ourselves today. We're planting them for the young people who'll be here in 20 years. A tree is an intergenerational gift. That's the mindset we need to have."

Despite this, few young people are aware of the existence of this programme – 72.4% of survey respondents had not heard the phrase 'liveable neighbourhoods'. But young people still had strong views on what a 'liveable' neighbourhood might be. Young people want neighbourhoods that are not just green but also safe, accessible, social and inclusive.
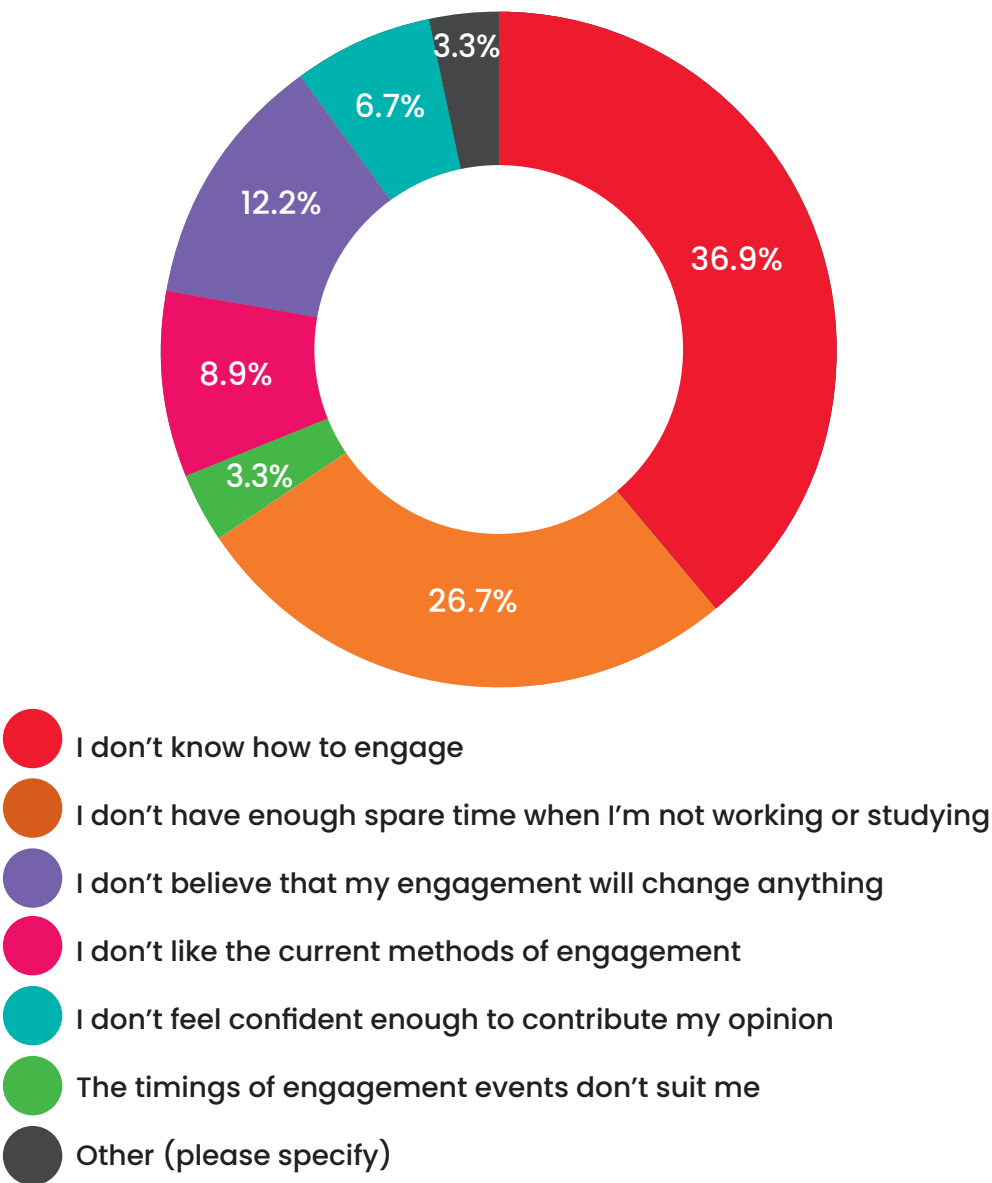
"Arguably, the biggest finding from this research is that the ideals of Islington Council's Liveable Neighbourhoods programme largely resonate with young people, but we want these schemes to work in favour of the many, to make things just and equitable."
Young researchers

- **90% of survey respondents believe the green transition must address the everyday realities of economic and social inequality.** Insecure, unaffordable housing, the high cost of living, and wide income gaps are underlying barriers to a neighbourhood's liveability.

- **Safety is a major concern for young people.** "Unsafe" was the second most common emotion reported by survey respondents when walking in Islington. Young people described how a lack of safety intersects with factors like race, gender and disability to threaten their mental health and connection with local places and people.

- **Young people value walking and cycling, but only when it feels safe.** Bike theft alone was reported 56 times as a major barrier to cycling. And even though many blame cars for road danger, **47% of young people still want to own a car in the future**. This was partly due to the sense of security that cars offered.

- Young people want a say and are full of creative ideas for the green transition, yet feel disengaged, lack time, are uncertain how to participate and are doubtful they'll be heard. **70% of our young survey respondents want more involvement in local decisions, but 38% don't know where to start**.

'What prevents you from engaging with Islington Council?'

- 36.9% — I don't know how to engage
- 26.7% — I don't have enough spare time when I'm not working or studying
- 12.2% — I don't believe that my engagement will change anything
- 8.9% — I don't like the current methods of engagement
- 6.7% — I don't feel confident enough to contribute my opinion
- 3.3% — The timings of engagement events don't suit me
- 3.3% — Other (please specify)

"It has been hugely empowering to take an active role as young peer researchers and have the opportunity to work directly with Islington Council to create change. Additionally, learning new skills such as survey design, data analysis, public speaking and gaining a deeper understanding of how the council works was valuable.**"**

Young researcher

Our recommendations

Our young researchers identified the following recommendations and tested and refined these with policymakers and other young people at a workshop. They combine with an overarching recommendation to strengthen youth engagement in existing work at Islington Council, such as with the School Streets programme, since these already correspond to youth priorities for the green transition.

Recommendation 1
Link the green transition to everyday realities of economic and social inequality in London.

Practical example

Work across the council to strengthen connections between programmes targeting housing, inclusive economies and local green transitions, and across levels of government by lobbying central government for measures like rent controls

Recommendation 2
Prioritise safety when designing neighbourhood transformations.

Practical example

Invite young women and non-binary people to participate in mapping unsafe areas around the borough and taking policymakers on guided walks

Recommendation 3
Make it safer to choose cycling.

Practical example

Continue to roll out the School Streets programme in secondary schools, with co-designed sessions around new or planned pedestrianised streets, to give young people ownership of the change

Recommendation 4
Prioritise low-cost or free bicycle provision for young people.

Practical example

Provide free bicycles for young people from low-income communities in the borough (using unclaimed stolen bicycles recovered by the police)

Recommendation 5
Make it easier for young people to access green and social spaces.

Practical example

Explore how more free events, such as live music, and intergenerational community activities, can take place in green spaces, and, crucially, how these can be effectively communicated to young people

Recommendation 6
Improve year-round provision of green and social spaces.

Practical example

Develop a "winter strategy" for green spaces and young people, to understand how green spaces are used during the winter, and evaluate which parks lack amenities or feel less pleasant to spend time in during the winter months

Recommendation 7
Meet young people where they are.

Practical example

Engage with young people in the places they already spend time (offline and online), such as schools, youth clubs, cafés and sports events, as well as on social media such as Instagram or TikTok

Recommendation 8
Co-design communication materials with young people.

Practical example

Work with institutions like the Islington Youth Council or teams of young peer researchers to co-design communications – recognising that young people are often best placed to engage other young people

Recommendation 9
Frame climate action in terms of tangible benefits for young people.

Practical example

Emphasise the cost saving benefits of walking and cycling in the borough, as well as the fact that many benefits young people associate with driving (control, independence, convenience, sociability) can also be found in walking and cycling

Recommendation 10
Invest in a tailored educational programme on local urban climate risks and green transitions for young people.

Practical example

Work with schools to use Personal, Social and Health Education lessons, assemblies, and general studies to build young people's understanding of local climate risks, global drivers of the climate crisis, and how to make a change at a local level. This material could then be adapted for non-formal educational spaces, such as youth clubs or sports and community centres

Please scan
here to read
the full report