

# Rethinking Green Transitions

A youth-led peer research project in Islington





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# Foreword

With extreme weather increasingly common and the impacts of climate change felt more than ever, London urgently needs a green transition. But we are also living in a time of striking wealth inequality – exemplified by the ongoing cost-of-living and housing crises. Many young people in London are struggling to get by, and the climate crisis is just one concern on the long list.

However, young people's experiences and priorities must shape the decisions made about our city's future. The green transition – our society's journey towards social and environmental sustainability – should reflect the voices of those who will inherit its consequences.

This project wants to bring young people to the heart of green policymaking in Islington, London. Young people are currently underrepresented in council engagement and local politics. But this project showed us that young voices are there to be platformed. There are no shortages of opinions! From calls for greener, safer

and more connected streets to concerns about the cost of living, young participants articulated a broad and nuanced vision for their neighbourhoods.

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



This project feels unique, in that it worked with young people with diverse lived experiences to gain a better insight into wider youth perspectives on the green transition. We think that other initiatives can learn from this, by bringing in the people they aim to serve in a more targeted, intentional way.

Before this project, many of us didn't know what 'liveable neighbourhoods' really meant and hadn't heard about Islington Council's programme to make neighbourhoods more liveable. But we shared a desire to see positive change in our borough, starting with the most deprived areas. Arguably, the biggest

finding from this research is that the ideals of Islington Council's [Liveable Neighbourhoods \(LNs\)](#) programme largely resonate with young people, as long as they work in favour of the many – to make things more just and equitable.

We hope to see more youth engagement surrounding climate action and green transitions as well as opportunities to keep young people engaged and energised in debates long into the future.

**Maryam Jimale, Maanya Jones, Joseph Rees, Maddy Westhead (young researchers on the Rethinking Green Transitions project).**

# Introduction

**Islington Council's bold vision for 2030 is to ensure that everyone can live healthy, independent lives in some of London's greenest, healthiest and most people-friendly neighbourhoods.**

A key part of this transition is the Liveable Neighbourhoods (LNs) programme, which seeks to reduce traffic, improve air quality, enhance walking and cycling infrastructure, and create more welcoming public spaces. For these changes to be successful and fair, they must reflect the needs and experiences of all residents, including young people.

The Rethinking Green Transitions research project was a year-long collaboration between LSE Cities, a research centre at the London School of Economics, Islington Council, and Partnership for Young London. It aimed to bring young people aged 16 to 26 to the heart of Islington's transition towards a green and healthy future, and to invite them into a broader conversation about what the green transition means.

The project took a peer-research approach, where young people and policymakers came together as a research team. During interviews, focus groups and a survey, we engaged with young people living, studying or working in Islington to understand their lived experiences, priorities and ideas for

how the borough might be transformed through the green transition. We define the green transition loosely as humanity's journey towards social and environmental sustainability, seen at a local level through initiatives like Islington's LNs programme.

Young people have the most to gain from a green transition, as they look ahead to decades of accelerating climate crisis. Yet, they are rarely central to local policy design. Our research findings highlight that young people care deeply about the climate crisis but face significant barriers to participating in green policymaking. First, young people are preoccupied with immediate concerns like inequality and safety, which they don't see as being adequately integrated into green transition policy. Second, there is a lack of creative, targeted engagement which gives young people a stake in and ownership over the green transition.

This policy report explores how young people experience their neighbourhoods, and what makes them feel safe and excited about living, working and travelling through Islington. It also analyses what makes them

feel excluded or disengaged from climate conversations. It focuses on how Liveable Neighbourhoods can become more inclusive of young people's aspirations, and how the council can engage young people better.

## Why focus on young people in Islington?

Young people in Islington are growing up in a borough of contrasts. In 2025, Islington was named the [healthiest inner London borough](#) for the fifth year in a row, recognised for its bold, people-first approach to creating greener, safer, and more welcoming streets. While Islington Council is one of the most environmentally ambitious in the UK, it is also one of the most unequal. As the UK's second most densely populated local authority and with the second lowest amount of green space per capita, residents of Islington face disproportionate risk from urban heat island effects and flash flooding. The borough's housing stock – often ageing, poorly

ventilated and difficult to cool – creates dangerous conditions during increasingly frequent heatwaves. The relative lack of green space provides few cooling refuges during extreme heat events while increased rainfall overwhelms the drainage infrastructure, causing flooding that leaves those who live in basement flats particularly vulnerable. These climate vulnerabilities, combined with high levels of deprivation, create an urgent need for action.

Islington Council has committed to bringing resident voices into policymaking on climate action and to creating more opportunities for residents to be involved in decision-making in their communities.

In 2024, the council conducted the [first-ever Islington Climate Panel](#), which represented a new model for engaging residents, hearing from underrepresented voices, and putting communities at the heart of everything the council does. Many young people in Islington face immediate challenges related to housing, transport, safety and access to green space, each of these intersecting with race, gender,



income and disability. As a result, the green transition was not a top priority for many young participants in our research. However, they were interested in joining a conversation about it, especially when we defined it as an opportunity to build a different kind of future that was fairer and more inclusive across all areas of their lives.

Our research shows that young people in Islington want a say, yet they feel disengaged and uncertain about how to participate and are doubtful they'll be heard. Their sense of being excluded mirrors the national picture for youth climate policy engagement: only 9% of young people aged 18 to 24 years feel they have a significant say in climate decisions ([2023 YouGov Poll](#)). But we found that young people in Islington want this to change: 70% of young people responding to our survey want to be more involved in local decisions, yet 38% said they don't know how to get involved. This knowledge gap and sense of disconnection can feel frustrating to policymakers, whose

investment in driving ambitious changes often stems directly from their desire to centre young people. As Mathew Bonomi, Head of Transport Projects at Islington Council, says:

**"We've got this opportunity to build a society that's happier and better resourced, so why wouldn't we do that? I think about it this way: 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. We need to ask: who are we doing these projects for?"**

This perspective highlights the importance of long-term thinking and intergenerational responsibility. By placing young people at the centre of this research, we aim to ensure that their voices can support the design and delivery of Islington's climate action projects going forward.

## The Liveable Neighbourhoods programme – a holistic entry point

The LNs programme was chosen as the focus of this research by our peer-research team because it offers a practical and holistic way to explore the green transition at a local level – bringing together a range of interventions such as improved public spaces, safer streets, greener infrastructure, and better access to walking, cycling and public transport. These are all elements that shape how we experience our neighbourhoods day to day.

LNs are not just about transport or the environment. Historically, the programme evolved from the Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTNs) which were established in Islington (and across the UK) during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, rather than focusing primarily on traffic restrictions, LNs look at transforming Islington, in part through reallocating street space from cars to green and social spaces, but also through broader greening and public realm investments. They are about how people live, move and connect in their communities. This offers a powerful lens through which to explore broader, interconnected questions of equity, safety, belonging, and participation in climate action.

For young people, these changes are relevant and meaningful. Despite this, they are often underrepresented in local consultations and decision-making processes. In recent council consultations on LNs, participation from the 16 to 26 age group was the lowest of all demographics, making up just 1% of respondents. This underrepresentation contrasts with the strong interest young people show in local

climate and environmental issues. Among our survey respondents, 74% agreed that addressing climate change and the environmental crisis should be a top priority for the council. And although most young people (72.4%) hadn't heard of the LNs programme, they generally supported the changes proposed.

LNs are of course only a small part of the change London needs as part of the green transition – topics like retrofitting buildings, renewable energy provision, changes to consumption patterns and resource use, waste management, and green jobs and skills all fall beyond its scope – with only some of these areas being the responsibility of local government. The way that responsibilities for the green transition are divided between central and local government can make climate action more challenging and complex. Local authorities are responsible for delivering key services, such as transport, housing, waste and planning, and these play a significant role in the green transition.

However, their ability to act decisively is often limited by tight budgets, fragmented powers, and a reliance on national policies that may not reflect local needs. This misalignment can make it harder for councils to advance the green transition than they and their residents would like. Mindful of these constraints our young researchers' recommendations focused on the changes that Islington can make, aside from some limited examples of lobbying for changes from the Greater London Authority or central government.

# Overview of findings

## Theme 1

# Liveable neighbourhoods and climate justice

- Most young people don't fully understand what Liveable Neighbourhoods are. **72.4% of survey respondents had not heard the phrase 'liveable neighbourhoods' before.** But many support the programme's underlying aims to create a greener, healthier, more inclusive borough and appreciate the holistic framing of neighbourhood transformation.
- However, young people feel that social and economic inequality limits the 'liveability' of neighbourhoods. **90% of survey respondents believe the green transition must address the everyday realities of economic and social inequality.**
- Young people want climate action, but high costs of housing and transport and wide income gaps undermine efforts to create neighbourhoods where everyone can live well.

## Theme 2

# Safety

- Safety is a major concern for young people, especially when walking, cycling or spending time in Islington's public and green spaces. **"Unsafe" was the second most common emotion reported when walking in Islington.** Young people (especially women, minorities and those with disabilities) are concerned about poor lighting, road danger and crime.
- The feeling of being unsafe on Islington's streets affects mental health, limits mobility and inhibits young people's connections with their neighbourhoods. It pushes some to retreat from encounters with local places and people, preferring to socialise at home and drive a car for security.

### Theme 3

## Transport

- Walking and cycling are preferred modes of transport (in part because of the high costs of public transport), but only when seen as safe.
- Young people want to cycle more but often walk or take the bus due to the challenges of cycling in Islington. **Bike theft alone was mentioned 56 times as a barrier to cycling.** Physical ability and confidence are also barriers, including having never learnt to cycle, fatigue or disability.
- Young people feel conflicted about car ownership, with cars representing pollution and traffic, but also control, security, convenience and status. **47% of surveyed young people want to own a car in Islington in the future**, including those who care about the climate.

### Theme 4

## Green Spaces

- Young people value parks and green space for mental health, connecting with nature and socialising – **87% want to spend more time in green spaces.**
- However, the use of green spaces is limited by a lack of time, concerns about safety (especially after dark), and a perception that some parks are being monetised or are unwelcoming.
- Young people want public spaces to be greener but also have low-cost or free amenities.

### Theme 5

## Social Spaces

- Young people want more intergenerational community connection. **58% of survey respondents want to get to know their neighbours better for a greater sense of safety and belonging.**
- Young people feel there is a lack of free, accessible social spaces and activities, and worry about being seen negatively for socialising in public.
- Most respondents rated their satisfaction with public spaces in Islington as moderate, and **the most common feeling when walking in Islington was 'neutral'**, suggesting that more needs to be done to make Islington's streets engaging and stimulating social spaces.

### Theme 6

## Engagement

- Young people want a say in local issues, yet feel disengaged, uncertain how to participate and doubtful they'll be heard.
- A significant knowledge gap exists: **70% of young people want more involvement in local decisions, but 38% don't know how.** Many ideas our young participants had for engagement were approaches the council is already taking – suggesting that improved communication is needed.
- There is a basic lack of awareness and ownership, not only of green transitions policies like the LNs programme but of how local government works and how it can impact their lives and hopes for the city's future.
- Young people want to be met where they are – online via social media and offline in schools, youth clubs and community hubs.
- Young people generally appreciate positive, holistic and ambitious visions of the green transition at a neighbourhood level, rather than just a focus on individual measures like traffic reduction.



# Methodology

# Methodology

**Peer research is a form of Participatory Action Research (PAR) that involves the communities that are affected by the research in the design and delivery of it.**

By using peer research, we aimed to empower young peer researchers to steer and conduct the work, based on their lived experience of being young in Islington. We want to again thank the four young peer researchers for their hard work from the start of this project in September 2024:

- Maryam Jimale, 21
- Joseph Rees, 25
- Maanya Jones, 27
- Maddy Westhead, 20

Our research team also included two young policymakers from Islington Council's Strategy and Engagement team, and one researcher from LSE Cities.

- Max Edgington, 27
- Imogen Hamilton-Jones, 31
- Monika Milewska, 28

LSE Cities chose to work with the Strategy and Engagement team at Islington Council due to: their role as a centrally based team that works across directorates and topics makes them well placed to embed impact across silos in the Council, their previous experience of both resident engagement and green policy (including through the recent Islington Climate Panel) and their expertise in designing and taking forward policy recommendations.



## Assembling the peer-research team

We recruited our young researchers by advertising through Islington Council's youth networks in the borough – including schools, youth clubs, asking those within the council that work with this age group to share it with their networks, and encouraging young people that

had previously been involved in other engagement projects to apply. We also used our social media channels. We wanted to ensure the research team included a range of experiences of Islington, for example, both long-term residents and newly arrived young people in the borough.

Definitions of the age range for 'young people' are contested, with many arguing that we are increasingly seeing a trend of

‘extended adolescence’ where traditional markers of adulthood (such as moving out of the family home, finding secure employment or starting your own family) are delayed by socio-economic conditions ([Sukarieh 2014](#)). In recognition of this, we opted for an age range of 16 to 26 years, which is longer than many definitions. We wanted to include perspectives of people well into their twenties who have left educational institutions, often making it harder for local councils to connect with them.

## Process, training and design

This project has been guided by four key principles:

1. **Power sharing:** It was important that young peer researchers were not only involved in most decisions, but had the final say on key research design decisions. They were equal partners to Islington Council and LSE Cities.

2. **Mutual respect for experience/expertise:**

The researchers were recruited because of their diverse range of experiences, local to Islington. All young peer researchers were paid the London Living Wage in recognition of the value of their time and labour.

3. **Informed decision-making:** Young researchers were provided with training and support to make informed decisions at each stage of the process. It was vital that they gained skills and learning alongside the decisions that they were expected to make.

4. **Maximum involvement:** This project aimed to get the young researchers involved in as many aspects of the research project as possible; establishing research aims, designing methods, stakeholder engagement, conducting interviews and focus groups, survey design, analysing data, report writing and communicating key findings at events and through a short film and social media.

After exploring the topic of green transitions in Islington, and learning about research questions, the young researchers decided on two research questions. Both focus not only on the transition being green, but also on it being just, since fairness and inclusion were central to our conversations from the outset. We phrased them as follows:

1. How do young people think and feel about the transition towards a green and just Islington?
2. How can the council encourage, learn from and respond to young peoples’ perspectives on the transition towards a green and just Islington?

### Young peer researchers were supported with the design and fieldwork over three stages

1. **Stage 1 – research planning and training**

The young researchers worked with Islington Council and LSE Cities to decide on a research scope. We discussed three potential topics to focus on (green spaces, green jobs and economic transitions, and the LNs programme). We assessed research feasibility, personal interests and potential for policy impact as a group and agreed upon the LNs programme as a holistic entry point. Our research team received training from Partnership for Young London (PYL), who supported us in designing research methods.

2. **Stage 2 – fieldwork stage**

The young researchers were trained in interview methods, how to facilitate focus groups and how to design surveys (by PYL, LSE and Islington Council). They then conducted interviews and focus groups

with young people and key policymakers at Islington Council, and co-designed a survey aimed at young people (aged 16 to 26 years) in the borough.

3. **Stage 3 – analysis stage**

The research team worked with PYL to analyse the data from the survey, interviews and focus groups, coming up with the structure of the report and identifying findings. We then held a workshop at Islington Council to refine our analysis and co-develop recommendations together with policymakers from across different services.

The chapters and reflections have been written by a combination of the young researchers and the teams supporting the process on the Islington and LSE side respectively. Therefore, each chapter has a different voice and style. However, the report gives the perspectives of the whole research team, with the recommendations being led by the young researchers.

# Project timeline

## Research design

- August 2024
- Advertisement of opportunity for young people in Islington to join the research team
  - Recruitment of four young peer researchers



- September
- Kick off meeting: defining the green transition

- October
- Workshop on overview of Islington Climate Action
  - Field trip to see greening around Arsenal stadium with the council's Tree Planting and Engagement team

- November
- Training on research questions and design
  - Workshop on the LNs programme

## Fieldwork

- December
- Interviews with young people
- January 2025
- Field trip to Tufnell Park ward to see proposed LNs site in Islington
- February
- Training on survey design
  - Mid-project evaluation
- March
- Focus groups with young people
  - Interviews with policymakers



- April
- Training on qualitative analysis
  - Filmmaking training
  - Survey live April to May 2025

- May
- Training on quantitative analysis
  - Training on public speaking
  - Filming in Islington
  - Workshop on early findings and recommendations with Islington Council

## Preparing and sharing outputs

- June
- Final field trip to the [Cally LN](#) in Caledonian Road area
  - Report writing, and preparation of film and social media outputs
  - LSE Festival event with young researcher Maanya Jones, Mete Coban, Deputy Mayor of London for Environment and Energy, Councillor Rowena Champion, Executive Member for Air Quality, Transport and Environment at Islington Council
- July
- Project launch event at LSE



Research methods and sample

The fieldwork took place between December 2024 and May 2025. We engaged with a total of 184 people, either through an online survey, interviews or focus groups conducted in person by the young researchers (or occasionally online in the case of policymakers).

We also experimented with creative methods, including using the young researchers’ own collages and photos of the borough as prompts for discussion in focus groups. Inspired by urban ethnography, we spent time together in Islington, observing, recording and discussing how young people use Islington’s streets, as well as walking around proposed LNs programme sites guided by council representatives.

Quotes in this report are taken from transcriptions of interview and focus group recordings and are anonymised for all young people and most policymakers (unless policymakers requested otherwise).

Survey sample:

A survey designed by our young researchers was circulated via Islington Council’s network with youth spaces and

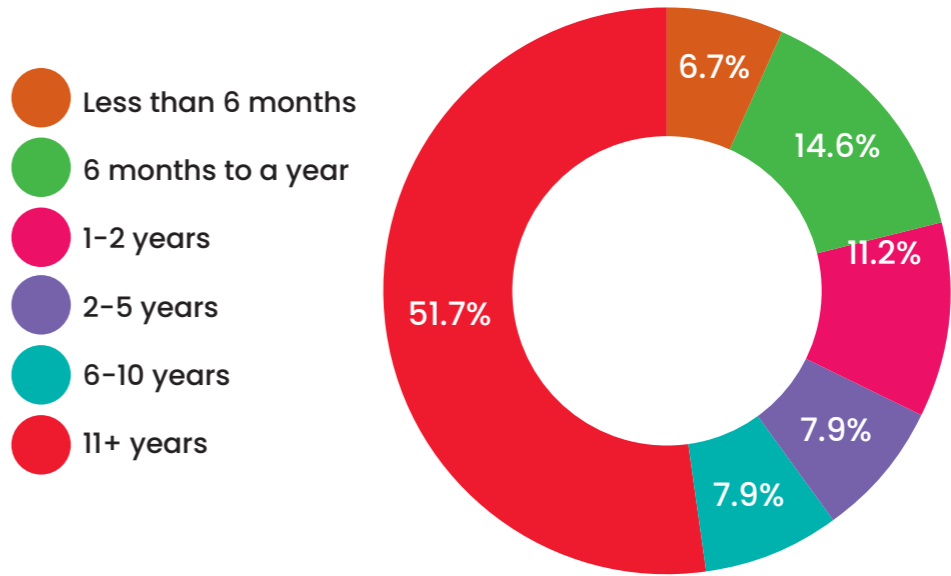
on social media, including Instagram and TikTok. It was completed by 116 young people between April and May 2025. While we had hoped for a higher response rate, we were pleased with the demographic diversity of the sample. The fact that more young people weren’t motivated to complete the survey is illustrative of the challenge of engaging them through this standard data collection method.

We decided to include not just young people living in the borough, but also those commuting to and from for work or studies, given Islington’s reputation as a hub for the creative arts, music, comedy, sports and higher education. The survey respondents had a variety of connections to Islington:

- 87.3% of survey respondents lived in Islington
- Of respondents living outside Islington, 53.8% study in Islington and 46.2% work in the borough
- Many resident respondents have lived in Islington for over 11 years, making up 51.7% of the dataset, as shown in Figure 1.
- \* Short-term residents (less than one year) at 21.3%.
- \* Established residents (two – ten years) at 15.8%.

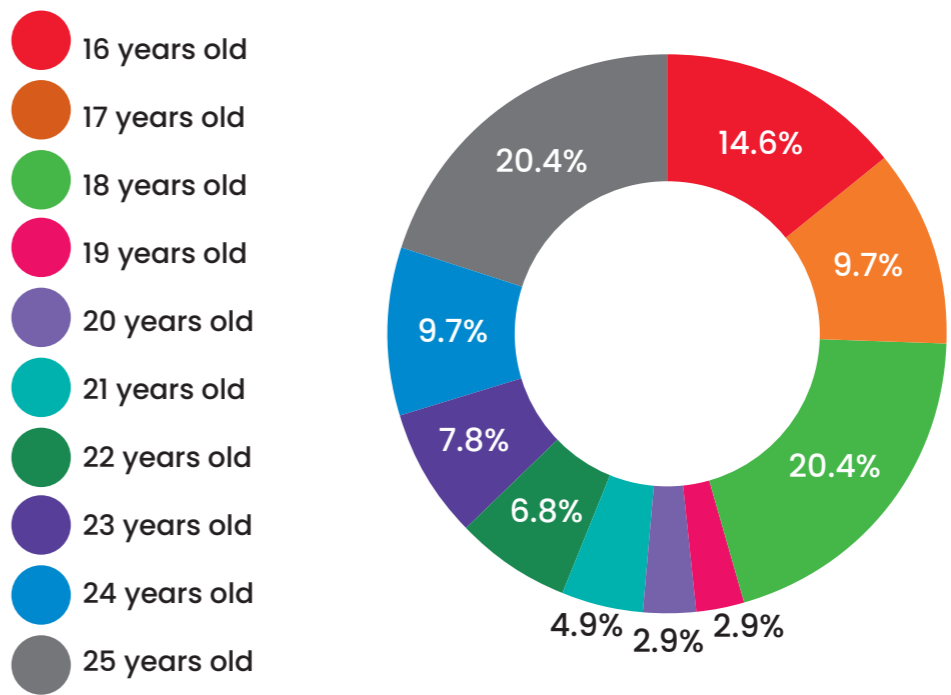
‘How long have you lived in Islington?’

Figure 1



‘How old are you?’

Figure 2



**Age:** Survey respondents were aged between 16 and 25 years. Most commonly, participants were aged 16 to 17 years (24.3%), followed by 18 to 19 years (23.3%), and 20 to 21 years (7.8%). 44.7% were aged 22 years or older, as shown in figure 2.

**Gender:** the survey had a female response rate of 52.7% and a male response rate of 45.5%, with 1.8% identifying as non-binary or a third gender.

**Ethnicity:** three out of four (73.6%) respondents were White, followed by Black (16.4%), Mixed Ethnicity (7.3%), or Asian (1.8%).

**Sexual orientation:** four out of five (81.8%) identified as straight or heterosexual. A minority (13.6%) identified as bisexual, while a much smaller minority (2.7%) identified as gay or lesbian.

Most respondents (76.5%) reported that they do not consider themselves disabled under the Equality Act 2010. 15.3% said they do consider themselves disabled, while 8.2% preferred not to say. This is in comparison to the [2021 Census](#) that showed that 7.3% of people considered themselves disabled under the Equality Act and a further 6.1% who are not considered disabled but have a long-term physical or mental health condition.

#### **Interview and focus group participants:**

Our young researchers conducted 11 interviews with their peers, lasting six hours. They co-designed an interview guide

and identified participants through their personal and extended networks. They prioritised selecting interview participants with diverse experiences of Islington.

They also led six focus groups, with 31 young people. These focus groups were arranged through Islington Council's networks with schools and the youth sector and took place at: Arsenal Youth Hub, Copenhagen Youth Project, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson School, Highbury Grove School, Global Generation's story garden, and the Climate Jams workspace. All participants were aged 16 to 26 years, with the majority of participants at the younger end.

The young researchers also conducted 10 interviews with policy officers and decision-makers at Islington Council, lasting a total of seven hours. They co-designed the interview guide and scheduled interviews with participants suggested by the policymakers on our research team. These included three councillors and representatives of the following departments: Transport, Planning, Community Wealth Building, Climate and Environment, Children's Services, and the Chief Executive's Unit.

Our final research activity was a workshop with 18 key policymakers and decision-makers from various council teams. The young researchers presented emerging findings and facilitated World Café style discussions of our analysis and draft recommendations.

# Research themes and findings

# Climate Justice

Maanya Jones, young researcher

“One of the first pieces of work we did for this project was to look at the perception of Islington on social media. A quick Instagram and TikTok search showed cozy cafes, quaint pubs and vibrant markets painting Islington in a warm and aesthetically pleasing light. However, there is another reality of Islington, where there is large wealth inequality and access to green spaces and better facilities depends on your postcode.

When I was researching, I came across the [Islington Fairness Commission report](#), which discusses critical issues in Islington such as that one in six people has a disability or long-term illness that affects their day-to-day activities. What really caught my eye was the deprivation map of Islington which outlined the most deprived areas such as Finsbury Park, Holloway and Highbury. Considering this research was done in 2008, I was alarmed that seemingly not much had changed, as you can see here in the [State of Equalities in Islington](#) 2021 report.

As someone who has lived, worked and studied in Islington, and who has a background in politics, sociology and human rights, I was intrigued by this opportunity. I came into this project through the lens of social justice and equity. To me, green transitions cannot happen until historically marginalised and



neglected groups are part of it. We need to see what we can collectively do to help those communities first, as oftentimes they bear the brunt of climate change, for example, by being unable to afford to live on quiet, residential roads resulting in more air and noise pollution from cars.

The topic of intersectionality, equity and social and climate justice came up in nearly every workshop discussion and survey result from young people – from the lack of green spaces or accessibility to these spaces, to the cost-of-living crisis, renting crisis, unemployment, safety and disability justice. The young people who have participated in our research have made it clear that the green transition won't work unless it works for all, and this is non-negotiable.”

This report begins by unpacking our research participants' mixed feelings towards the overall concept and approach of Liveable Neighbourhoods. Young people's eagerness to see improvements to active travel infrastructure and green and social spaces sits uneasily alongside

their concerns about how the LNs programme might fail to address socio-economic inequality in the borough. The green transition, they repeatedly told us, must work for everyone, especially the most disadvantaged groups; it must be founded on climate justice.

## First impressions of the Liveable Neighbourhoods programme

In interviews and focus groups, the words 'liveable' and 'neighbourhood' began to spark imagination even before our researchers gave any explanation of what Islington Council intends the programme to be. The first reactions of three young people we spoke to, for example, were:

“The first thing that springs to mind is that a liveable neighbourhood is one that feels safe. That is safe and convenient transport-wise. But also has green space where people can be in contact with nature every day, rather than looking at concrete buildings.”

“[‘Liveable’ must be] an environment that you’d want to live in and that you can live in, that has access to everything that you would require – whether that’s

a GP or pharmacy or just shops that are affordable and community spaces. And then ‘neighbourhood’, I think really draws back that idea of community and how important that is. It’s an area where you know your neighbours and your neighbours want to know you.”

“To me liveable neighbourhoods are inclusive of people. It has to be racially, gender and disability inclusive so that people don’t feel like they’re not welcome in an area.”

These reactions illuminate youth priorities which we will return to throughout this report. Young people want neighbourhoods that are not just green but also safe, accessible, social and inclusive. This combination of environmental and social values into a vision of liveability chimes with Islington Council's [own definition of LNs](#) as places of “togetherness”: as “more environmentally friendly places where communities can come together and flourish”. The alignment between youth and policy visions of Islington's future is a promising

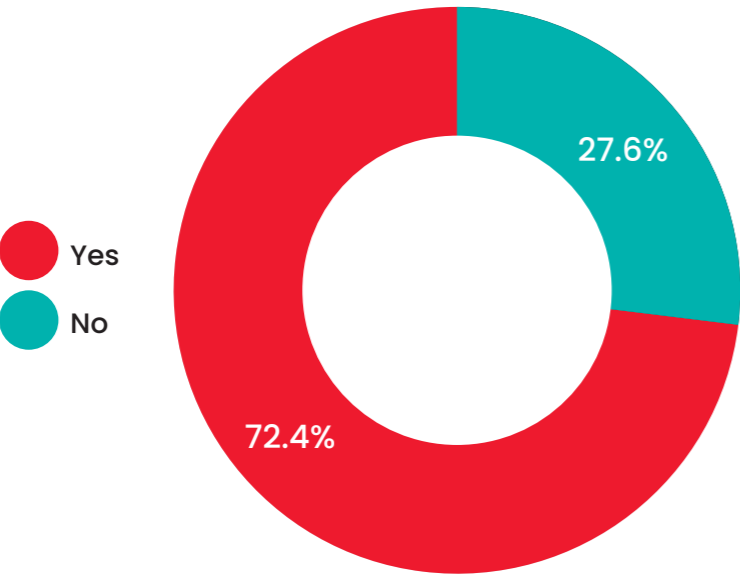
starting point for youth engagement in policymaking.

However, in practice young people are rarely aware that the LNs programme exists, as highlighted in figure 3, with almost 7 out

of 10 people not having heard the phrase “liveable neighbourhoods”. And even when they know about it, they don’t connect it with their everyday experiences and desires for the future of their neighbourhoods.

‘Have you heard the phrase ‘Liveable Neighbourhood’ before today?’

Figure 3



One participant’s experience is illustrative: he had seen flyers about LNs, but had a limited understanding of what the programme proposes, and expressed no sense of ownership over the agenda, saying:

“It’s eco. They [Islington Council] slap banners on people’s windows on Liverpool Road. I see it all the time. They’re something to do with green space and making it eco-liveable.”

He went on immediately to associate the programme primarily with traffic restrictions, which is controversial among drivers, but he didn’t feel was relevant to him:

“That’s why I prefer walking. I don’t have the stress of it. I don’t really feel it. It doesn’t affect me. But if I did [drive], I’d probably be a little bit more annoyed by it.”

The council’s justification of traffic restrictions as key policy interventions to improve the experience of walking and bring neighbourhoods together in green, social streets, has not reached this young man. The fact that he sees annoyance or neutrality as a reaction to the programme suggests how far traffic restrictions dominate public debate and stop deeper, more nuanced engagement.

There is huge potential in the overlap between youth and policy priorities for Islington’s LNs programme, but a long way to go before young people fully understand its holistic vision. This lack of awareness

and engagement is exacerbated by young people’s concerns about what they see as the biggest barrier to liveability in Islington – social and economic inequality.

Barriers to liveability: inequalities in Islington

Islington is a starkly unequal borough. Many of its neighbourhoods are characterised by divisions of extreme wealth and poverty. Islington is now the sixth most deprived local authority in London and ranks tenth highest for the proportion of children living in income-deprived households in the country (28%) ([State of Equalities in Islington 2023](#)). In 2022 to 2023, 44.8% (5,821) of primary school pupils in Islington’s schools were eligible for the deprivation [Pupil Premium](#) – a grant aimed at raising the attainment of disadvantaged pupils. Despite this, the council has the fifth-highest median monthly pay among local authorities in the country ([Local authority dashboard, The Health Foundation](#)).

Every conversation we had with young people in Islington touched on this reality, and 97% of those who responded to our survey agreed that the green transition must address economic and social inequality.

Young people frequently asked the research team whether the LNs programme would impact the inequality they encounter in daily life, and which they identify as a

systemic cause of life being hard in Islington (and across London). One young woman listened to a description of the active transport and public realm improvements proposed by the LNs programme and expressed frustration:

**“This isn’t doing enough. This isn’t changing things enough. Like, I want a bench, sure, but I also want to be able to afford to live here.”**

The lack of secure, affordable housing and the cost-of-living crisis were recurring topics that young people said climate policy should address, especially if promising to make neighbourhoods liveable. As other participants put it:

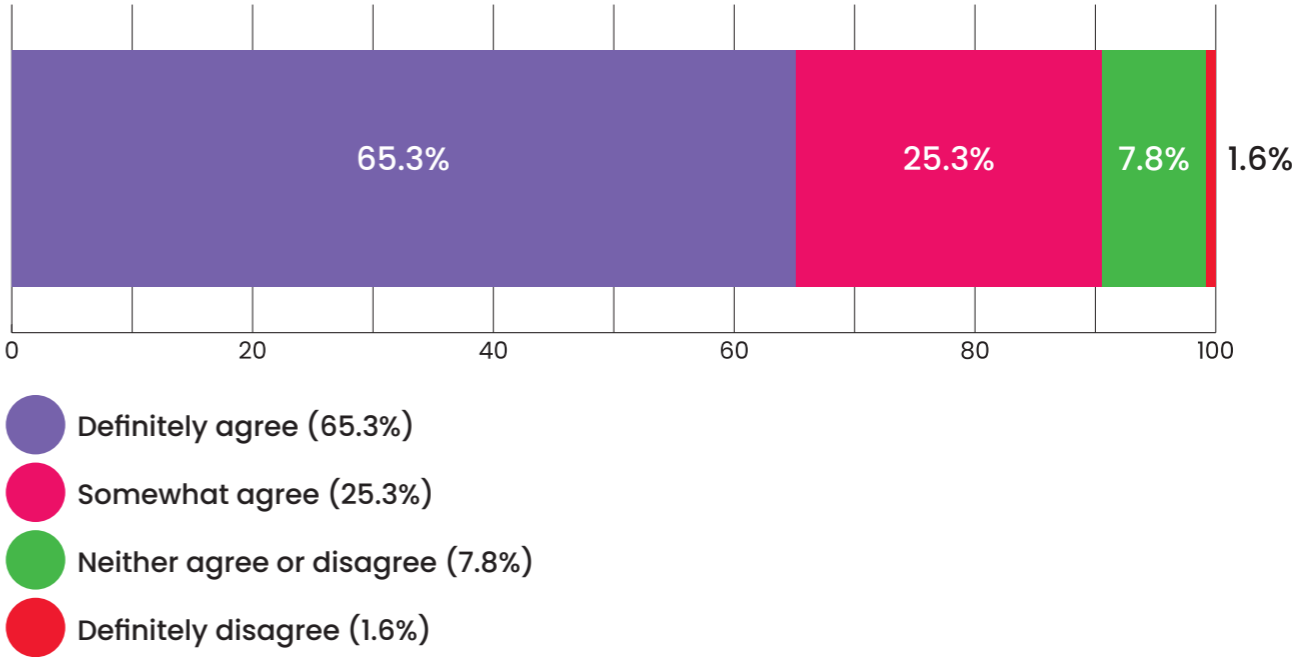
**“Sometimes it feels the benefits of being a) healthier and b) more eco-friendly are just far too taxing on your monthly budget or your yearly income ... I think I’m in a very privileged position to even be able to say that travelling in a green way is important to me. I’d be hesitant to go full into [saying that]. I just think more needs to be done before people transition to live green.”**

**“We have other concerns [...] We’re trying to like get a job or we’re trying to rent... [and climate action] just goes to the back of our minds.”**

Without explicitly engaging in the immediate economic challenges young people face in Islington, the LNs programme risks being deprioritised or ignored by young people, or met with hesitancy, suspicion or even active rejection. Some participants were anxious that the LNs programme didn’t pay enough attention to inequality, and their perception was that it may exacerbate existing challenges in the borough. As highlighted in figure 4, the majority of respondents, 90%, agreed that alongside making neighbourhoods more environmentally friendly, it is important to address economic and social inequality, with 65% definitely agreeing and 25% somewhat agreeing.

**‘Do you agree with the following statement?  
“As we improve our neighbourhoods to be more environmentally friendly, we need to also address economic and social inequality”’**

Figure 4



Their perception was that the investment in greening might unintentionally fuel increases in the (already extremely high) price of housing in the borough. Once, when we described the improvements the LNs programme seeks to make to Islington's public realm, one young woman immediately responded with a question: 'So, would that count as gentrifying the area?' Proposed LNs programme interventions were treated with suspicion as young people questioned whether these would only benefit residents who were well-off and could afford to live in pleasant and more expensive streets. Some put to us:

**"A lot of the side roads are a lot more expensive than the houses on the main road, so it feels like people who can afford more are able to benefit from less noise and less pollution and all the pollution is being moved onto the main roads where people live who can't afford to live in those nicer parts of Islington."**

However, research on traffic restrictions like LTNs shed doubt on this causal chain, showing that in fact these schemes cause traffic volumes to decrease overall, also known as traffic evaporation, including on boundary roads ([Aldred and others, 2021](#)). However, young people in Islington are not necessarily led by the latest scientific evidence, but by their lived experiences and what they encounter in their immediate surroundings. Policymakers, politicians and urban professionals must engage seriously with young people's perceptions about the relationship between a green transition

and inequality, before young people can be expected to dedicate their time and energy to engaging with the green transition.

## An intersectional approach to inequality

The LNs programme has the potential to resonate with young people, but only if it explicitly acknowledges the systemic underpinnings of why Islington's neighbourhoods can be hard to live in, for a myriad of reasons ranging from antisocial behaviour to congestion. This means recognising and working to challenge social and economic inequality, as well as related systemic trends such as over-work and time poverty, which young people also describe as barriers to connecting with local places and people.

It also means looking beyond social and economic inequality to understand how LNs relate to other kinds of inequality: young people have different relationships with their neighbourhoods depending on factors including gender, race, sexuality and disability. The following chapters set out to understand young people through an intersectionallens, rather than seeing them as a homogeneous group.

Local authorities face a challenging scenario where they do not have control over some of the mechanisms that make

an area more affordable and tackle intersecting inequalities. For example, councils do not have powers to control rents, prevent social housing from being sold to tenants, limit housing speculation and vacant properties, or increase welfare payments to residents. Islington Council attempts to make the borough more affordable for residents, through measures such as buying back housing that was formerly sold under the Right-to-Buy scheme, supporting residents through the Income Maximisation Team (iMAX team), and offering council tax reductions or exemptions for residents on the lowest incomes.

However, there is always more to be done, also in terms of building on Islington Council's ongoing work lobbying both the Greater London Authority and the UK Government for structural change, either individually or as part of representative groups of London's councils. Despite this complexity in the devolution of powers between layers of government, in the eyes of many young people, there is no obvious distinction between central and local government responsibilities.

Research participants told us that, to earn their trust and engagement, the council needs to centre young people's lived experiences of inequality in the borough. As one of our young peer researchers put it:

**"The way we start to do that is by listening to everybody and understanding what makes an area liveable to everybody."**



# Safety

**Monika Milewska, Policy and Innovation Officer at Islington Council**

“Clutching your keys in your jacket pocket, slowing down so that the person walking behind you can reveal themselves in front of you, hoping it’s just a passerby. Earbuds in, but with music at the lowest volume, eyes wide open, heart racing as if you’re running a marathon. And yet, the only journey you’re making is the short walk from the bus stop to your home.

What I’ve just described is a feeling unfortunately common to many young women and female-presenting young people walking alone at night. One that urgently requires attention in London. No wonder “unsafe” was the second most common emotion reported in our survey, filled out by young people living or commuting through Islington.

At the focus groups, I was struck by how much the comments resonated across the room. Someone would mention avoiding walking late at night, even if it would be a lot quicker, and many heads would nod in agreement; but it was the girls exchanging knowing looks. The next person would say they don’t feel safe cycling in London, particularly because of aggressive drivers, and again, more nods, this time evenly split between genders. Someone else would say they feel unsafe in crowds, while others said they feel more anxious when the streets are empty.

People brought up moped phone thefts, avoiding parks, and the fear of something



happening to them or their friends. Day or night, young people consistently feel scared of being out and about in the borough. For some, especially young people of colour, these fears were even more heightened due to experiences of racial profiling or feeling more targeted in public spaces.

We shouldn’t take this lightly. We need streets and parks that are better lit, cycling lanes that don’t end just as you’re about to join a road full of cars, and more spaces that help to build strong community bonds. That’s how we create more liveable places where people feel safer.

The LNs programme is a chance for Islington to take these concerns seriously and design streets and public spaces that work for young people and not against them.”



Safety emerged as one of the strongest and most consistent themes throughout this research. For many young people in Islington, safety is a daily concern that shapes how they move, where they go, and how they feel in their communities. Whether walking home at night, cycling to school, or spending time in parks, young people consistently identified safety as a key issue affecting their mental health and wellbeing, as well as transport choices.

## Transport safety

If the LNs programme aims to increase rates of active transport use and encourage young people to spend time out and about connecting to local people and places, it is important to understand their safety concerns and how to overcome them.

This section explores how young people experience safety in Islington’s streets, transport systems and public spaces. It highlights the barriers they face, the trade-offs they make, and the changes they want to see. It also considers how safety

intersects with gender, race and class, and how a more inclusive approach to urban design and policy can help build a borough where all young people feel secure and supported.

Many young people described how fear of crime, harassment or road danger made them anxious, restricted their movements or led them to avoid certain areas altogether. Some reported missing out on social opportunities or choosing more expensive or less sustainable travel options as a result.

**“It’s not safe. I don’t want to go out anymore. I got mugged the other day. It was terrible. So, I’d rather hang out at my friend’s place.”**

**“If I was less scared to cycle in London, I would do that as well. But I’ve had a bike incident before, so that’s the only thing that’s preventing me from doing that.”**

In our survey, “unsafe” was the second most common emotion reported when walking in Islington. There were 123 mentions of safety concerns, particularly related to cycling. This suggests that safety is not

just a personal issue but a systemic one that requires a coordinated response. The research also found that young people want to cycle more, but many do not feel safe doing so. Poor infrastructure, aggressive driving, and a lack of protected cycle lanes were frequently reported as barriers. Some participants said they only cycle during off-peak hours or for leisure, avoiding commuting times due to congestion and risk. Hostility towards cyclists – especially women – was another deterrent. Councillor Rowena Champion, Executive Member for Environment, Air Quality & Transport, raised the differing gendered experience of cycling:

**“If you talk to someone about allowing their child to cycle, chances are a number of them will say, ‘it’s just not safe’. Or if you ask them why they don’t cycle, ‘it’s not safe’, and that is a gender issue because women, as a whole, have not been cycling in the proportions that the men have, and we know that in other countries where you got safe infrastructure, actually that’s not the case. You do get much more parity.”**

Some reported witnessing female cyclists being harassed, reinforcing negative perceptions. This feeling among young people is supported by [recent research](#) by the London Cycling Campaign that shows that only 1 in 3 cyclists in London is female, with a recent survey of more than 1000 women revealing consistent abuse and harassment as well as a lack of safe infrastructure as major barriers to cycling.

While participants noticed council efforts to improve cycling infrastructure, such as protected lanes, these were often not placed on the most dangerous routes where they are most wanted such as around Angel.

Potholes were another major concern. Their size and frequency made cycling feel unsafe and steered many towards walking or taking the bus. Although some young people expressed interest in cycling, these barriers consistently stopped them. As several participants stated:

**“Cycle paths have been built, but they’re not that safe. Especially on the busiest roads.”**

**“I’ve seen a lot of young people who maybe shouldn’t be cycling or maybe should take a moment to learn, how to cycle on the road without putting yourself or other people in danger.”**

There were also concerns about the behaviour of other cyclists, with some describing a culture of rule-breaking and aggression that made cycling feel intimidating, particularly for beginners.

Buses were generally seen as a safer mode of transportation. Young people appreciated the presence of other passengers and the predictability of routes, with one person saying:

**“I’ve always found the bus to be relatively safe. If you’re travelling late at night and**

**you sit near the driver, you’re good to go. I would choose to take the bus rather than walk if it was dark or late at night.”**

Some said that traffic restrictions while reducing car use, could “make it feel more isolated and less safe”. Despite young people feeling this way, recent research from [Transport for London](#) has shown that LTNs on the whole see a decrease in crime levels.

However, some still preferred private transport late at night such as taxis or having someone pick them up in a car, even if it was more expensive or less sustainable

## Green and social space safety

Safety was also an issue in green and social spaces around the borough. One of the main themes was that safety is not experienced equally by young people in Islington. Young female-identifying research participants, spoke about feeling vulnerable in public spaces, especially at night, as illustrated by Improvement Design & Delivery Manager, from Islington Council, Molly Lee:

**“But then that’s not an equal use of space for young people. Some young people will feel comfortable in green spaces and others won’t. I think it creates quite a**



challenge in terms of where young people can hang out and feel safe.”

Concerns included harassment, assault and racial profiling, as well as a general sense of being unwelcome or unsafe.

“I think as a young woman, I don’t like walking in certain places, especially at night. I would rather get the bus home. Also, being a young Black woman is a factor here.”

These experiences were compounded by poor lighting, limited visibility and isolated areas. Parks and green spaces, while valued, were also seen as risky after dark.

“I refuse to go to the park at night just because there are some very, very dodgy characters, which I try to avoid, especially if I am by myself.”

Some identified specific parks where these problems were more prevalent, which influenced their choice of spaces to visit. Finsbury Park was the most frequently mentioned park. While it remains one of the most visited green spaces among young people, it is also a place some avoid – either occasionally or altogether.

Due to safety concerns, some young people avoid parks entirely at night or when alone. Many only feel comfortable visiting if friends or family accompany them, or if the park is well-lit. When this point was discussed with policymakers, they were sympathetic to the desire for better lighting but faced restrictions on the amount of lighting in parks, due to [animal habitat considerations](#).

Safety is also linked to a sense of belonging and being part of the community, with 58% of survey respondents saying they want to get to know their neighbours more. During focus groups, young people often spoke about the importance of feeling known, supported and connected with their community. They suggested that more events, youth activities and shared spaces could help build trust and reduce fear:

“A good way to deter crime is having more community activities, stuff like music, things that encourage collectiveness.”

This was also recognised by Islington Council, as one policymaker says:

“We need to change the physical environment so it becomes a more social space where community can build. A prime example is what we did in Highbury Fields – speaking to schools, and young girls in particular, to design a space that made them feel comfortable.”

Young people in Islington raised safety as a key concern in how they move around and use public spaces. Many described feeling unsafe due to crime, harassment, road danger or poor infrastructure, which often limited choices and affected wellbeing. Safety needs to be a central consideration in how liveable neighbourhoods are designed and delivered. Streets, parks and transport systems should support young people to feel secure, included, and able to move freely.

The next sections on transport and green spaces will explore these issues in more depth, as safety came through strongly in both areas.



# Transport

Joseph Rees, young researcher

“It was during a focus group with young Londoners at the Arsenal Hub that I realised just how important transport is to the green transition. Hearing these young people express their opinions on cars. Listening to their ideas unravel. To them, cars represented ambition, safety and freedom. They also represented obstacles, congestion, disorder and pollution. This exchange highlighted the complexity of the climate policies, and it was then I knew how important this work was.

Having lived in London for two and a half years it is impossible not to have strong opinions on transport. One way or another we all rely on it, be it for our daily commute or just getting from place to place. Transport has shaped my experience of living in London hugely. I am on my third borough so have had my commute rely on at least half of the tube lines. This alone led me to expect a number of diverse opinions on transport to come out of this project. I was right. Transport is the backbone of our existence here in London.

Our research has shown that safety is a driving factor in determining how young people use transport in Islington. They believe that bicycle theft and road danger are obstacles to cycling and therefore



would rather use buses to travel within the borough. The need for improvements in cycling infrastructure, particularly in the north of the borough, was a clear takeaway.

Young people have complex and sometimes conflicting views on transport. Despite this, some common themes were present across focus groups, surveys and interviews. Safety was an overarching concern, but so was affordability... the joy of walking and cycling compared with the dread of being stuck in traffic or on overcrowded public transport. Young people appreciate green modes of travel, but these need to see more investment before they can be fully embraced.”



Understanding how young people move through their neighbourhoods reveals much about the potential for a green transport transition in Islington. In our research, we asked young people not only how they travel now, but how they would ideally like to travel. Studying the gaps between today's reality and visions for the future allows us to identify concrete barriers and opportunities for the LNs programme and the green transition.

The LNs programme has an explicit aim to help people travel in more sustainable ways, through measures such as cycle lanes, improved public walkways and restrictions on driving through certain areas. This chapter attempts to understand how young people's current travel patterns and future priorities relate to these measures, and what barriers young people face that currently prevent a green transport transition.

## The value of walking and cycling

Young people were overwhelmingly positive about walking in Islington, but mentioned problems such as the state of the pavements, areas being congested, or a preference for taking a bus or other forms of transport through certain areas at night rather than walking.

Many discussed the compact layout of Islington and how many of the places that they visit are within walking distance. Some young people made a favourable comparison between the ease of walking in Islington and other parts of London, the country, or other places they had lived in or visited.

“I think that walking in Islington is a lot easier than other places. Compared to other boroughs, I feel like everything is a lot closer.”



**"I hate the Tube. Unless it's necessary, I won't use it. If I have the time and the weather's good, walking is just nicer."**

Young people mentioned some of the benefits of walking such as saving money, discovering new places while walking or having certainty about how long it will take to get to places compared to other transport modes. Some mentioned that they had grown up walking everywhere due to not having access to a car, and this was a habit they were taking into adulthood.

Some young people have referenced specific schemes that the council has implemented such as the School Streets programme (where traffic is not allowed to pass through a street at pick-up and drop-off times, or permanent traffic restrictions).

**"There's one School Street at the end of my road for schools, and I think that's a good idea because it makes it a bit calmer."**

**"I feel like the School Streets one's good because I bet it doesn't just benefit the parents and the kids, but the car drivers as well. Because as a driver, you don't have the chance of hitting a person when you're near a school."**

Some policymakers mentioned schemes to help with active travel, especially given that nearly [70% of Islington residents](#) don't have access to a car. Islington residents don't have access to a car.

**"We are rebalancing some of the streets away from having heavy traffic dominance. It is really important to do that because children love cycling too."**

Cycling around the borough, both using personal bikes and hire bikes, was also viewed positively, again with the challenges of safety. Some young people mentioned that they liked cycling in summer when the weather was better and how it is much quicker to get to places than either walking or public transport. Similarly to walking,

some also mentioned the cost savings that can be made through cycling.

**"Riding my bike and walking are mostly free. There's no point in paying like £5 just to go to one area, when you could take a quick way and walk on your own which is faster."**

Hire bikes such as Lime bikes were mentioned as having advantages such as speed and convenience. They were seen as both affordable and unaffordable options to travel around the borough. Some referenced how they had got a monthly pass for a hire bike, which was cheaper using their student discount. Others said that individual journeys on hire bikes are expensive, but the cost is worth it due to the quicker journey time.

**"Lime Bike is the best because it's quick, efficient, but it does take a lot of money so that's the only downside to it."**

Buses were popular not only for being free or low-cost but also appreciated for making travel more scenic, sociable and

convenient. It is perhaps a positive sign that the second most popular answer to 'What are the main reasons you don't take public transport more often?' was 'Not applicable – I already take public transport a lot', as shown in figure 5.

## Cost, convenience and safety of sustainable travel

Widespread bike theft discourages cycling and contributes to a sense of vulnerability. There were many stories about bikes being stolen, affecting young people we spoke to or their friends and family.

**"My dad's friend got pushed off his bike and it was stolen. That wouldn't happen in a car – and it happens a lot."**

Storage was also a barrier: cramped housing or the need to carry bikes up flights of stairs made parking bikes inconvenient.

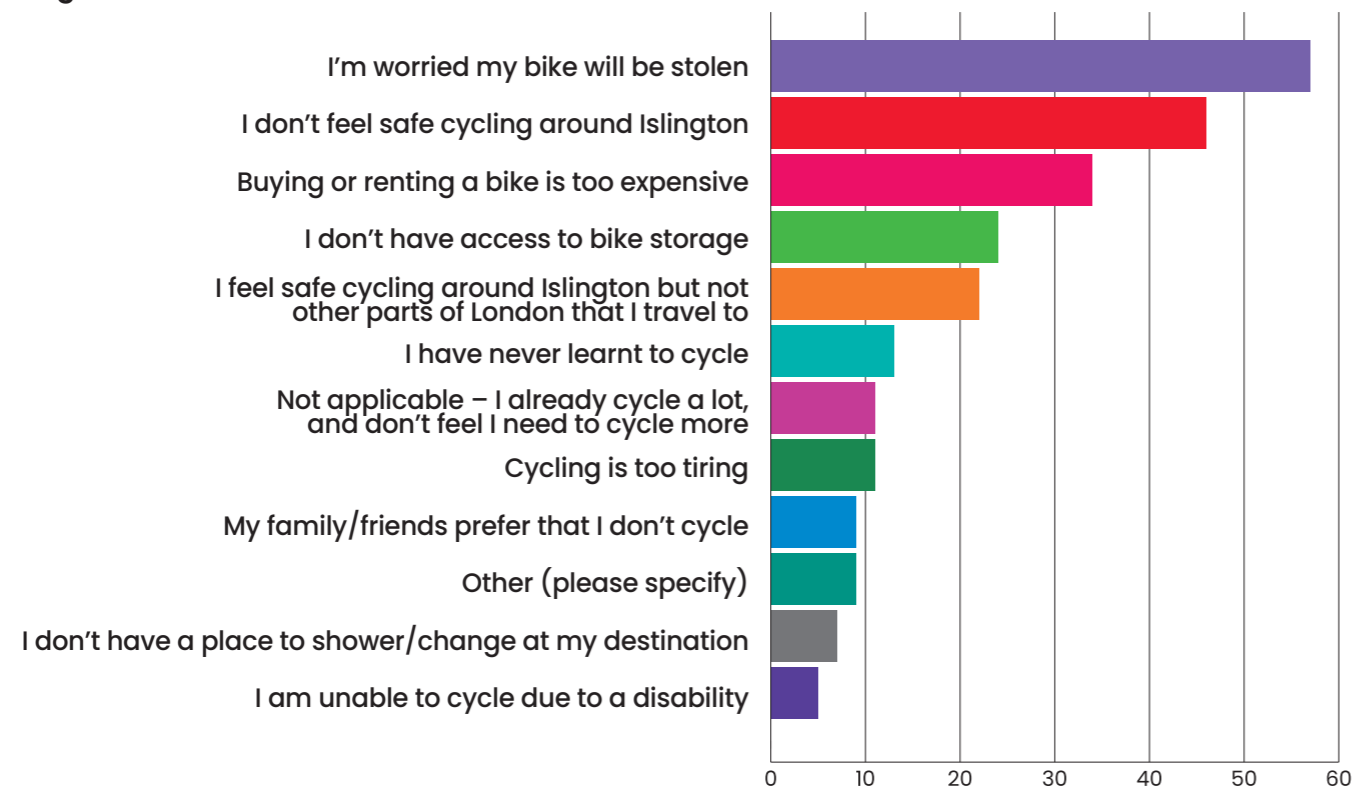
As highlighted in figure 5, worry about a bike being stolen is the biggest factor preventing young people from cycling more, closely followed by feeling unsafe cycling.

There was a clear call for more secure bike storage near homes and schools. The bike storage problem and the fear of theft were

the driving factors behind young people's positive views of hire bikes, such as Lime. Despite some people stating that these are expensive, they were still widely used, including by some who wouldn't otherwise cycle.

## 'What are the main reasons you don't cycle more?'

Figure 5



Cycle safety was also a major barrier, as explored in chapter 2 on safety.

The rising cost of travel prevents young people from taking public transport in the borough. Once free travel passes expire, many are incentivised to walk, or in the worst-case scenario, stop visiting places that they used to.

"I think I had £14 come out of my card the other day from TFL. I thought you are joking. That's insane."

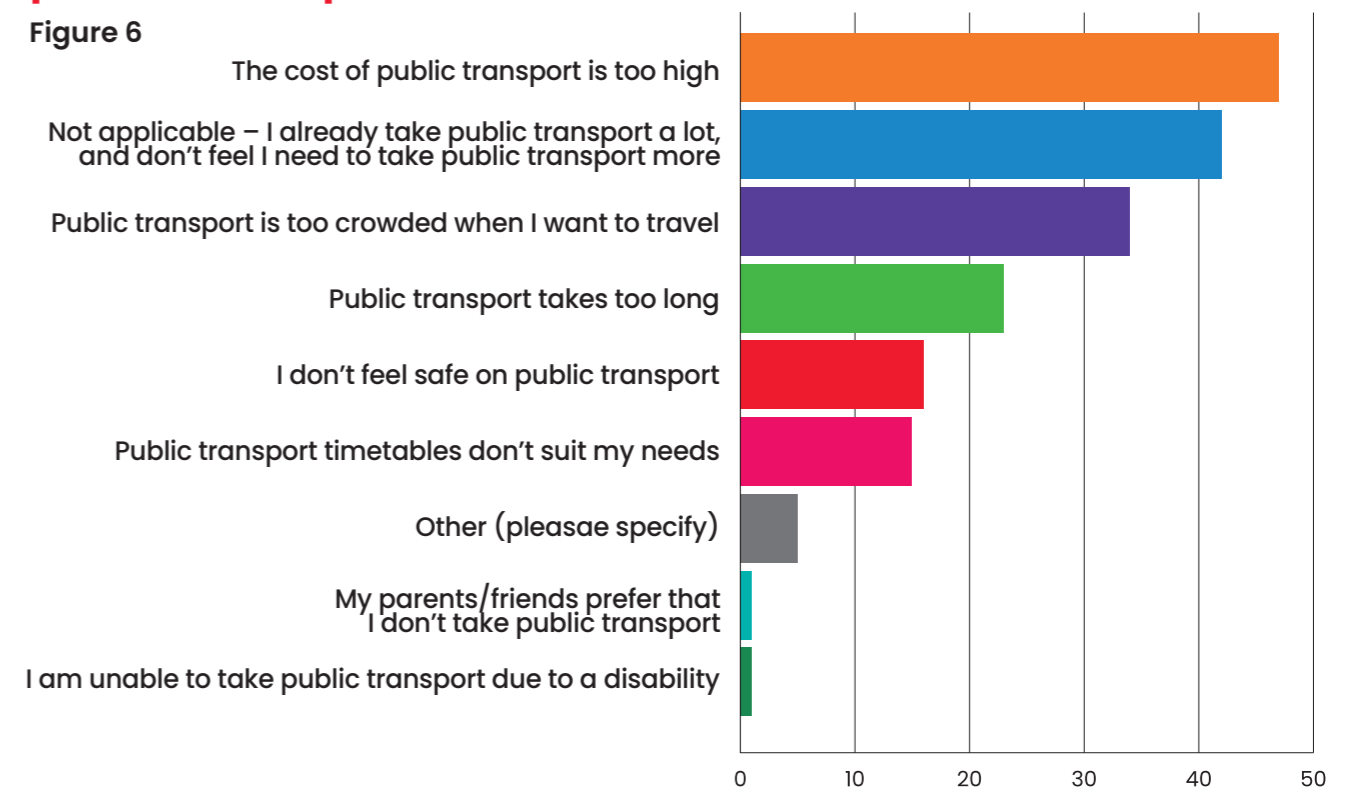
The same young person went on to say:

"Sometimes I'd rather just stay at home, which is actually kind of a shame, because I feel there's so much new stuff going on around but I'm sometimes thinking the fact that I have to pay this amount to even get to the event. I don't know if it's worth it."

Public transport fares led some to consider using a car if one was available. However, the price of parking and driving was also seen as expensive.

## 'What are the main reasons you don't take public transport more?'

Figure 6



Cycling, despite its reputation as a cheap option, was seen as expensive. Hire bikes such as Lime were praised for convenience but criticised for prices. Buying a bike came with significant upfront costs – helmet, lock, lights – and for students and low-income earners without access to schemes like Cycle to Work, this made cycling seem unaffordable. However, when complaining about Tube prices, cycling was not viewed as a viable alternative to save money over the medium term, but more of an “activity” to do or to get to places in their immediate vicinity.

Poor pavement quality was also raised as a barrier to walking. Young people cited uneven surfaces, overcrowded paths, and poorly completed works as making walking more difficult and less enjoyable. Areas around Upper Street and Angel were flagged as particularly congested, limiting access for disabled people and creating stress for neurodivergent pedestrians.

“What about pavements? Because when we’re talking about accessibility, , my nan is in a wheelchair, and I take her out every Sunday when I’m pushing her down the road and there’s bits on the pavement and I have to take her on the roads. The cars are driving past us, and I’m worried she’s going to tip out the wheelchair.It’s dangerous.”

A policymaker also said that as well as some pavements and walkways being in a bad state of repair, they also represented underutilised public space.

Inclusive Design Officer from Islington Council, Barbara Tanska, discussed the problem of pavements for people travelling around the borough:

**“In terms of quality of our transport infrastructure in Islington, it’s not terrible, I would say it’s pretty good, but there are elements of design and accessibility that leave a lot of room for improvement. Outside pavement quality, accessibility is probably a number one priority.”**

However, policymakers said their ability to improve the quality of pavements and associated public realm features is sometimes limited by the complex legal and regulatory arrangements governing pavement space. For example, on many high streets pavement ownership is split between the council and local businesses, requiring negotiation and collaboration with individual business owners to agree on maintenance and changes.

## Conflicted views on cars and driving

Young people we spoke to as part of this research shared conflicted feelings about driving and cars. There was more positivity around cars than our research team expected, especially given so few young people living in big cities like London know how to drive or can afford a car. The young researchers’ surprise suggests young people have a range of feelings about cars but perhaps don’t often encounter different attitudes in their immediate social circles.

For many young people, cars remained aspirational, symbolic of independence and security. As two participants stated:

“I love being in my own space and I can listen to music and I’m in control.”

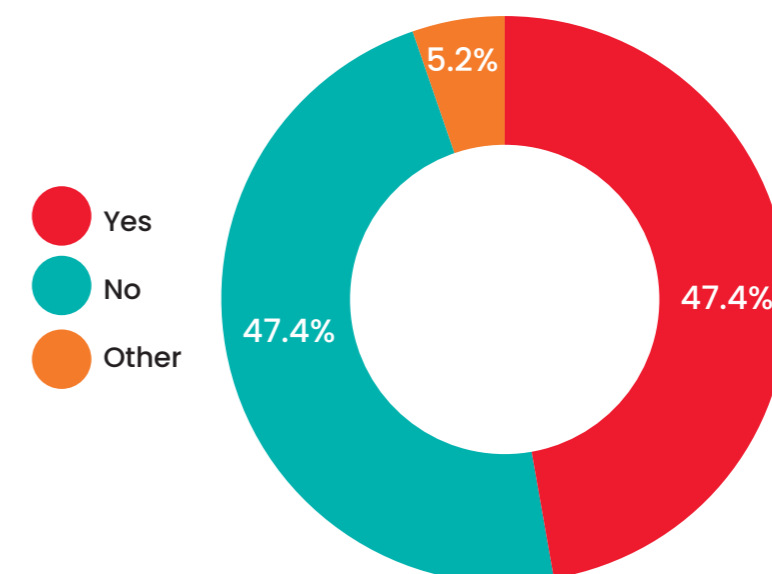
“I’d be safer if I just had a car [...In the past] if my parents were feeling nice, they would pick me up after a night out, but obviously they can’t anymore, because they have to park a bit further away.”

Others emphasised the convenience of cars (especially with rising public transport costs) and their value to people with disabilities; they perceived cars as being more comfortable and accessible than many active travel options currently on offer.

As shown in figure 7, over 47% of our survey respondents see car ownership as a future goal.

## ‘Do you plan to own and drive a car in Islington in the future?’

Figure 7



However, the same proportion of survey respondents did not plan to drive in the future. While this is a lower proportion than we expected, one policymaker suggested that it is still likely higher than it might have been several decades ago when there was less awareness of the environmental harms of driving and it was cheaper and more convenient.

Many young people did criticise driving as unnecessary, due to the good transport options on offer in the borough and London more widely.

**“There are so many better ways to get around. Sometimes the train or bus is faster than a car, so I don’t get why cars are still the main priority.”**

Some couldn’t justify driving in London due to cost, congestion and strong public transport links.

**“I think it’s just unrealistic for Londoners to be car owners, because of economic reasons most people can’t afford a car and to pay for petrol here.”**

Supporting this view, [research published by The Health Foundation in 2022–23](#) found that 32% of households in the poorest fifth in the UK did not have access to a car, compared with just 7% of households in the wealthiest fifth, highlighting a clear economic divide in car ownership.

Others suggested that feelings of control, independence and comfort that may at times be associated with car use can also be found in active travel:

**“I don’t like the lack of control I feel on public transport. I often feel I would be faster walking, and I could take a side route, and I’d feel comfortable doing so.”**

Similarly, the fun and sociability that some young people associate with driving can also be found on foot:

**“If I was going to Primrose Hill or something with my friends to eat pizza, or watch the sunset or something. Then I might be like, ‘oh, let’s walk!’”**

Driving was also seen to be contributing to inequalities due to the majority not driving but experiencing the greatest negative impacts. This view was echoed by Highbury Councillor Benali Hamdache:

**“Car driving in places like London creates inequalities and creates impacts on some of the most deprived people in this borough. I think it is right that we encourage people to drive less [...] but also we have to do a lot of work to make sure that the alternatives are accessible for everyone.”**

Many didn’t see themselves living in Islington or London in the long-term due

to the cost of living, despite wanting to. This shows how socio-economic factors as well as deeply held cultural values and attitudes intersect with people’s transport choices. For example, if young people see themselves driving a car as an integral part of their everyday life in the future, this may make them more likely to find it aspirational to leave inner London for a place where driving is more accessible.

This chapter explored young people’s views on transport options in the borough. They generally recognise that public transport options in Islington are good, though they have specific preferences regarding the type of transport they use, as well as where and when they use it. Overall, there is a substantial gap between how young people in Islington would ideally like to travel and how they currently do. This gap is largely influenced by cost, safety and convenience. Young people want more measures in place to feel safe when getting around the borough in a sustainable way, continued efforts to reduce the price of travel and action to stop bike theft.



# Green spaces

**Max Edgington, Policy Coordinator  
at Islington Council**

“Working on this project, I have become more conscious of the green spaces in the borough, especially when cycling to work. My commute takes me through the south of the borough through Farringdon, past Spa Fields, up Rosebury Avenue, and then onto Upper Street to the Town Hall. Rosebury Avenue is a stunning street with huge trees providing canopy cover over its entire length.

My commute could give the impression of Islington as a leafy borough. But this betrays the true reality of the area. As nice as these spaces are, Islington has the second-lowest proportion of green space of all councils in the country.

Seeing areas beyond my commute, through engagement activities in schools, youth centres or housing estates, it’s noticeable that there are huge swaths of the borough with very little public green space. Trees provide shading and a cooling effect, which is especially important in a borough that saw 40°C in the recent past. As well as trees’ environmental credentials, they contribute to creating some of the most beautiful



streets in London. These streets are often the most well-known to those outside the borough, contributing to a false reputation for being much ‘leafier’ than reality. But this isn’t the norm with much of Islington’s public realm dominated by grey space, car parking and congestion.

This project shows that young people desire a borough with more green spaces, distributed equitably. The council knows how to create beautiful, pleasant, people-orientated streets, with examples across the borough. The challenge is scaling them.”



Young people in Islington value green spaces for socialising, exercising and mental wellbeing. However, they see accessibility, safety and the quality of spaces as an issue. Many appreciate their availability but struggle to find the time to visit them as often as they would like. Concerns have also been raised about the lack of suitable, low-cost events that occur in parks, and a desire for parks to be used as an avenue for socialising. The LNs programme introduces additional parks (pocket parks) and greening (such as planting grass, trees and plants), so understanding how people use and want to use green spaces is important for future plans.

## The value of green spaces

Young people felt that green spaces are frequently associated with opportunities to meet friends and exercise, particularly in good weather. Many mentioned the convenience of accessing these areas, particularly due to their central locations and that the spaces were free to use. The most frequently mentioned green spaces included Highbury Fields, Caledonian Park, Finsbury Park, and Regent’s canal – though the latter is not officially classified as a green space. These represent the largest green spaces in the borough.

In addition to parks, young people also discussed the importance of green spaces on the streets. Many appreciate greenery in urban spaces, as it softens the divide between nature and the built environment, making streets more pleasant. These were also places where young people could de-stress, particularly during busy periods in school or work. Some highlighted pocket parks as particularly beneficial, offering calm spaces that provide respite from the overstimulation of city life, but didn't require a long trip to a larger park, to gain a similar experience.

Some young people also spoke about enjoying people-watching or even striking up conversations with strangers, and both solitary and social visits to parks and green spaces contribute positively to their mental health.

**"I have sat in Islington Green on Upper Street many times and I like that. It's in the middle of what seems like a really busy place, but you can just sit in the park and chill for a moment. There's always people sitting on the benches. It just feels really nice." "I love seeing people in parks. It's almost like they can stop and just feel more connected to each other and to nature."**

This aligns with the key reasons people enjoy green spaces – their positive impact on mental health and social interaction. Young people repeatedly talked about using green spaces – and also blue spaces like Regent's canal – as calm places to "dip into if you feel overstimulated".

## Barriers to accessing green spaces: lack of safety or free time

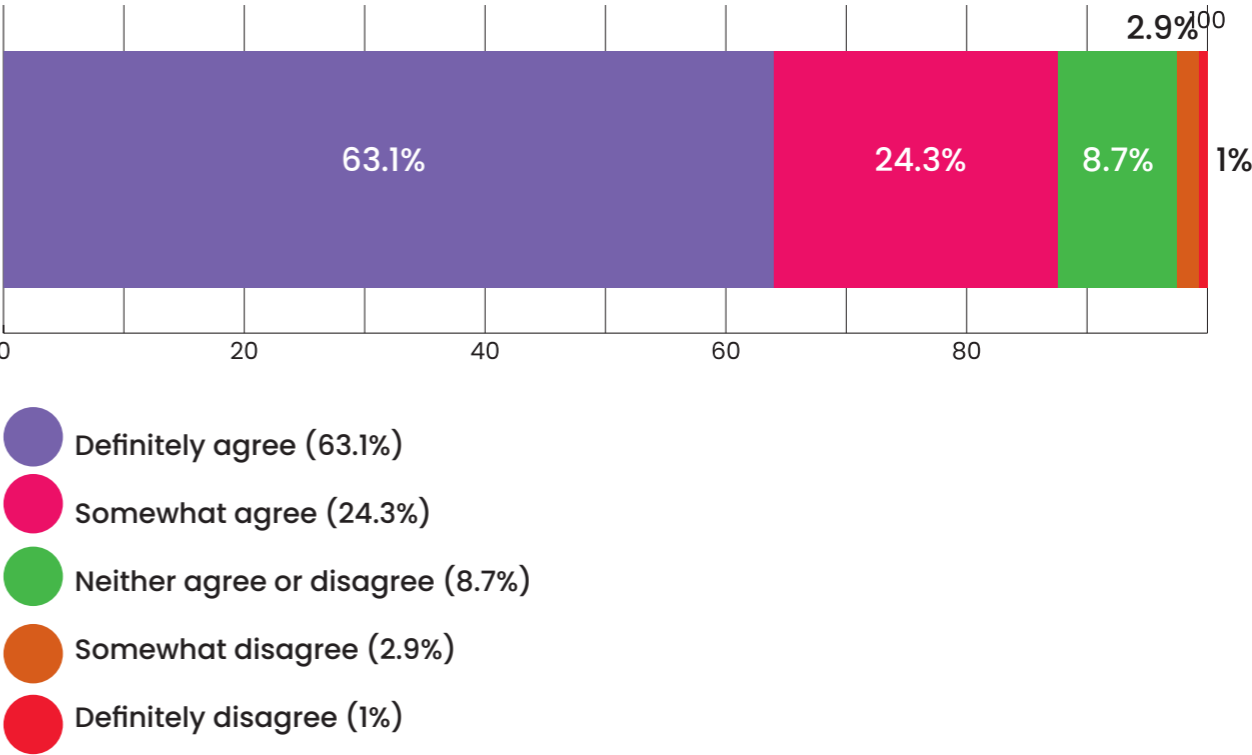
Young people say their experience of green spaces varies significantly across seasons. Some shared that during the summer, they appreciated the space as it provided a free activity in an expensive city – especially for those who live in flats. However, concerns were raised about the increasing monetisation of parks through activities like day festivals, which can limit

access at certain times of the year and cause damage to the park. In contrast, during the colder months, people are far less likely to visit. This can then lead to parks feeling unsafe due to a lack of people in them and this becomes a self-perpetuating cycle. Factors such as unpleasant weather, darkness that makes parks feel unsafe, and a lack of activities reduce their appeal in winter.

A recurring concern among young people was antisocial behaviour, which at times stopped them from visiting green spaces. Issues such as litter, drug dealing and

## 'Do you agree with the following statement? "I would like to spend more time in green spaces" (e.g. in parks, football pitches, community gardens, planted areas of streets)'

Figure 8



feeling unsafe were frequently mentioned.

It was also thought that parks are distributed unevenly in the borough. Islington has 64 sites of Importance for Nature Conservation, and they manage around 160 parks and open spaces. As Andrew Bedford, Assistant Director for Greener, More Active from Islington Council says:

**“We have a lot of really great parks and we’re improving our sports facilities and our outdoor spaces, but I think we also have to acknowledge that we have quite a lot of parts of the borough where there isn’t easy access to green spaces.”**

Despite valuing green spaces, many young people also feel frustrated that they do not have enough free time to visit them, as highlighted in figure 8.

The issue is less about accessibility – since many parks are within walking distance or a short bus ride – but rather the constraints of daily schedules. One policymaker said how pocket parks provided a cure for people who are too busy to access larger green spaces.

**“Pocket parks are where you have greenery in the street, a place to sit down, a place to stop. Not just something that you’re travelling through to get to your next place in a big rush.”**

Pocket parks and greening street spaces, in the way liveable neighbourhoods aspire to, also respond to one young person’s concerns that:

**“A lot of the green space is kind of separate to the city. It’s kind of like its own area. I think there’s not that much overlap between urban and natural environments, other than trees planted in the middle of the road.”**

Overcrowding is another barrier preventing some young people from enjoying green spaces. On pleasant days, some parks

become especially busy, making it difficult to find a quiet space. Some young people noted that there are many smaller parks in the borough that others may be unaware of. They suggested improved signage for these lesser-known parks to reduce congestion in more popular locations.

**“Many people live in areas where there’s limited access to green space, but even if you have got a space near you, do you feel like it’s a space that you can go into. Are you going to be welcome there? Are you going to feel comfortable in that space? And for many people, that’s just not the case. I don’t feel safe. They don’t feel welcomed.”**

Additionally, some young people of colour said that racial dynamics affected their comfort in certain parks, making them feel excluded. This point links to an overall aim of liveable neighbourhoods – they need to be inclusive and affordable to be liveable. Some argued that as areas become more desirable to live in through efforts such as greening, this could further fuel unaffordability and potentially displace long-term residents. Ensuring that greening is planned equitably and avoids these problems was something that young people spoke passionately about.

This chapter shares the views of young people on green spaces in the borough. It shows that green spaces hold deep value for them, not only as places to unwind, connect with others and support mental wellbeing, but as vital public assets in an increasingly dense urban landscape. Yet barriers around safety, time, overcrowding, antisocial behaviour and inclusive access prevent these spaces from being fully enjoyed by all. Addressing these challenges through equitable planning, thoughtful design, and community-led events will be key to ensuring that the LNs programme is truly inclusive, vibrant and responsive to the needs of young residents.



# Social spaces

**Imogen Hamilton-Jones,  
Policy Officer at LSE Cities**

“The focus group was over; the recorder packed away. I reached for a last grape, aware suddenly of the late hour in the white basement light of the co-working space we had borrowed. But around the table, no one seemed ready to leave.

Four young students spent the evening speaking with our peer researcher, Maryam, about Islington’s green transition. As Maryam thanked them for participating, they protested: “it’s you we should be thanking, this has been so much fun, thank you for setting it up!” They reflected that it was rare for them to have a dedicated time and space to meet new people – in person – and discuss an issue that resonated with their everyday life. “I feel that’s sort of because the way people live is like: I wake up, I go to work, I go home” one mused. “People are quite: go, go, go. It’s quite difficult to find an opportunity to talk to your neighbours.” And so we sat and chatted together for a little while longer.

Students are a particularly transient population in Islington, but their sense of rootlessness was not unique. Even young people who were born and raised in Islington told us that they have outgrown social spaces for younger children (like adventure playgrounds) but haven’t found many options to replace them. A few noted that they sometimes felt unwelcome in the fast-gentrifying streets that were once familiar.

Our research has shown that young people want Islington’s green transition to centre on community building. Many



young people we met were curious about engaging more with local people and debates – and, like the student focus group participants, often seemed more interested in the chance to join a conversation about Islington than about the specific topic of the green transition.

They recognised that communities have tensions, and neighbours don’t always see eye-to-eye, but felt that this was an interesting space to explore. Before we finally packed up, one participant suggested that division over Islington’s future might be worked through with more day-to-day exposure to communities around them, saying: “Maybe your neighbour is a different kind of person [...] and maybe the reason they’re not on board with the green transition is because they don’t have the same outlook on life [...] but] connecting with your neighbours is probably the best way to change their minds – because you don’t choose your neighbours.”

Islington Council’s LNs programme sets out to create welcoming community spaces and support more inviting, inclusive areas that all can enjoy. This aim resonates with young people, who are clear that the green transition needs to protect and enhance existing community spaces. Social connection, young people argued, should not be a happy by-product of a neighbourhood transformation; instead, it should be foundational to the aims and methods of the green transition.

This section unpacks what young people value in social spaces, what barriers they currently face when connecting with their neighbours, and what investments they would like to see in community infrastructure as part of the green transition.

## The value of social space

In one focus group, we heard about a young man’s experience of spending time in the social space of his neighbourhood:

**“Around Highbury Corner, I feel like it was built for socialising. You can’t go there without bumping into someone. There are always people around there, someone that you know, especially if you live in the**

**area. Sometimes I’ve just been walking around the area, and I don’t even plan to go to Highbury Fields, [but] you look over the road, you see a big green space. You are like: you know what, I’m going to go and walk over that because just look at it all! It just makes you a bit grateful that this is still here. With all the bad things that might be happening, I am glad there are still some places where you can feel at home that aren’t your house.”**

He describes his sense of joy, spontaneity and belonging as he walks through a lively public space and into a park, finding solace in familiar faces and green spaces. Although he had been wary of the role of traffic restrictions in areas that were part of the LNs programme and defensive of the right to drive, he valued the social space created when streets prioritise people over cars. He went on to reflect:

**“Think whatever was done to the roundabout – there was loads of work on it – I do think it was worth it.”**

When we asked young people to imagine their ideal future neighbourhood, descriptions of lively, convivial streets proliferated. Many also emphasised the importance of having space outside their houses for socialising with friends and neighbours:

“I like to meet new people, and I always say hi to our neighbours. I like two of them on the right side and that’s really nice, that’s just from hanging out in our garden space when we’ve all been outside at the same time. I think that everyone would really benefit from getting to know their neighbours better.”

This chimes with the thoughts of Highbury Councillor, Benali Hamdache, who says play and socialising is a central ingredient of liveable neighbourhoods:

“[Young people need] a space to play or a safe place to hang out with their friends. It’s really important that we make streets more welcoming and safe, so that young people, particularly from households which don’t have a garden, have access to public space and that it’s welcoming to everyone.”

Young people were also pragmatic about the value of knowing your neighbours in relation to safety concerns.

“I feel knowing your neighbours makes you feel safer because... when it gets dark my road is a bit scary. But I feel safer walking down the long dark road because I know I can run into my neighbours house if I need to, not just run away.”

“I feel safe in Islington in places like Holloway because I know that there are so many people who I know, the likelihood of bumping into someone that I know is high.”

Sometimes young people talked about the sense of safety and care being reciprocal – suggesting that they feel a sense of responsibility towards their neighbours across generations:

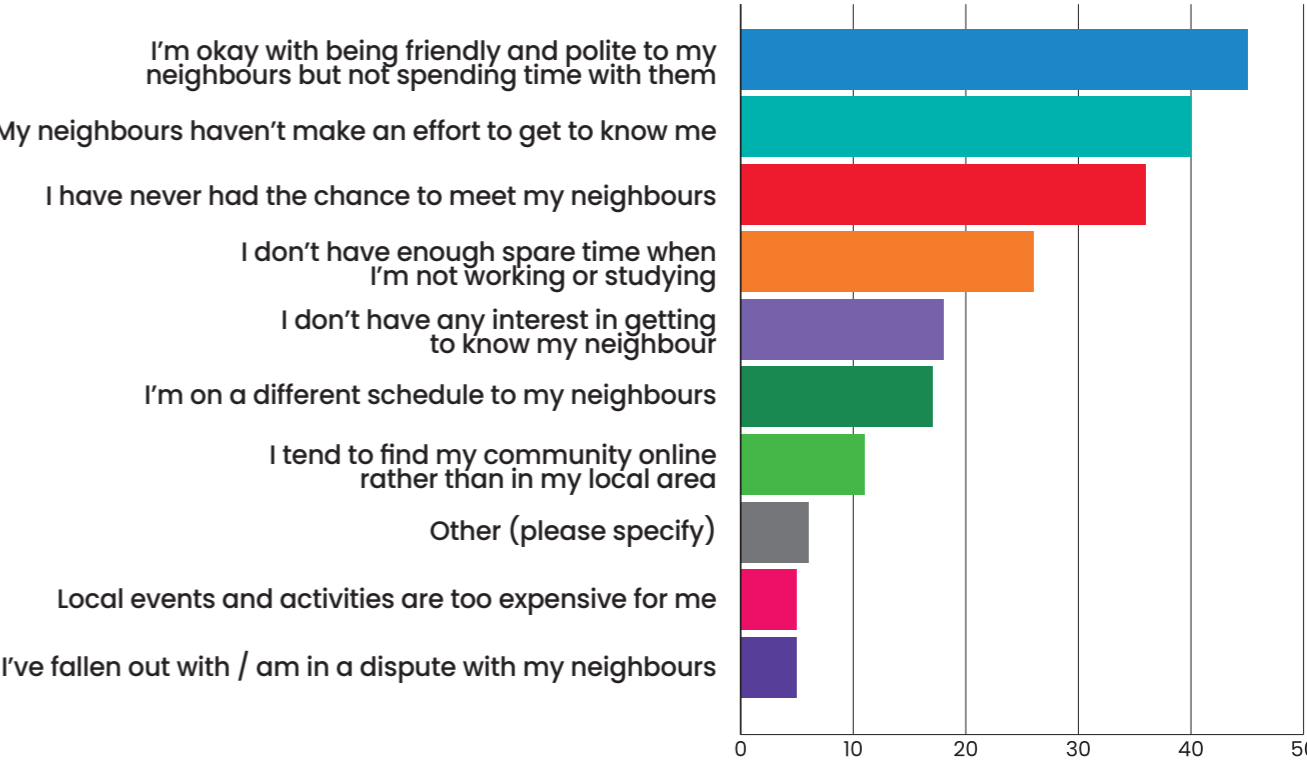
“I think it’s quite important to connect with people, and build relationships with them, make friends and help them where I can really.”

Of course, not all young people want to become close friends with their neighbours (although many would like to). When we asked our survey respondents whether they ‘would like to spend more time getting to know their neighbours’, 58% agreed, while only 17% disagreed.

When we asked why young people don’t spend more time with their neighbours, the response was that they are ‘okay with being friendly and polite and don’t want a closer relationship’, see figure 9.

‘What are the main reasons you don’t spend more time with your neighbours?’

Figure 9



One young person reflected that her generation has grown up in quite isolating times, where the idea of finding community in your local streets felt distant:

**“I think people don’t realise what they might be missing because we haven’t had that sense of community for a long time. But I think it would really benefit people to feel not so isolated in a world that’s getting pretty big and in a city that is so big. It’s really important to have a space [...] where you feel secure and looked after, and [where] you would look after others.”**



## Barriers to connecting with local communities: cultures, costs and prejudices

Some young people described a strong sense of isolation from local communities. This was especially prevalent among older participants (in their mid-twenties and outside of the institutions of formal education) or college and university students. These groups had often moved to Islington from outside London and were unsure how long they would stay. One university student described how systemic trends like insecure, unaffordable housing (meaning many students commute into Islington from outer London) and the treadmill of studying and working meant that:

**“There is no community [...] a lot of people have to travel two hours to get to the university and then [...] sometimes you just come and you don’t know why you’re there [...] You kind of just stand there. You’re in, you’re out, just for your diploma. And the only thing you care about is to survive. You just need to get your diploma to get to work. And then you know, you’re out of this thing, you’re in somewhere else.”**

Combatting this sense of alienation, of moving from place to place without meaning or purpose, might seem overwhelming. However, young people often pointed to the roots of their sense of disconnection. For example, the fact that amenities are concentrated in private rather than public spaces:

**“I don’t get to talk to my neighbours much or at all. I like being involved in the community [...] but in my day-to-day, because I live in a building that is very all-inclusive of everything, I don’t get to go out and say hi to people.”**

Or a lack of awareness of, and underinvestment in, community activities:

**“It’s really hard to find ongoing community activity and to know what’s on and where. I’ve definitely noticed there’s less and less happening, for example, I was looking for a local sport to do like boxing or something [...] or] a group for women that do self-defense training in my area. And I just couldn’t find anything.”**

Others, especially those born and raised in Islington, felt the main barrier to their sense of community was economic divides in the borough, and the cultural changes that come with affluent populations moving in.

**“There was more of a sense of community. My family is from a different background to other people who live on the street. I**

**think that is the answer to the detachment. I’m not really too forward [with my neighbours], to be honest.”**

Many commented on how exclusionary the lack of affordable social space can be:

**“I feel like a lot of spaces revolve around money as well. There’s not a lot of free space that you can go to.”**

**“What makes me happy is seeing shops that I know I can access. So, for example, if I’m looking down Upper Street, I feel that I can’t access a lot of those shops because lots of them are out of my budget [...] By the time I get to maybe, like, Nando’s or Sainsbury’s Local, I start to ease up. That’s when I’m like, ‘OK, cool. I can go here’. I feel more comfortable around that bit just because it’s stuff that I know I can go into comfortably. It’s not like I’m walking into a cafe and a pastry is like £6!”**

The need for more independent businesses that are both rooted in the local place identity and community (unlike supermarket or restaurant chains) and accessible for local residents is clear.

Finally, some worried that socialising on the street was viewed negatively by other residents:

**“We really need to make sure we can use streetspace not just for residential things and [make sure] that noise complaints**

aren't an issue [...so] that people don't feel they're going to get kicked off for being in the street in an area at like 9 or 10pm."

This relates to the concerns of a policymaker who noticed that:

**"Liveable neighbourhoods and loitering have become a big sort of debating point and have become quite controversial and difficult to push through. But that's because we're engaging with adults in this space, we are not giving voice to young people."**

Tensions between generations are inevitable in the shared space of a city, but our young participants would challenge the stereotype that youth gatherings are primarily disruptive. Perhaps, when confronting controversy like this, we should take the advice of the young participant in the focus group and open up social spaces so that people can listen to each other and change their minds:

**"Maybe your neighbour is a different kind of person, and they don't have the same outlook on life but connecting with your neighbours is probably the best way to change their minds."**

## Social activities and social streets

Young people offered practical suggestions on how to strengthen social space to make their neighbourhoods more liveable.

First, they argued for more social activities and events programming, such as dedicated time for sports or cultural activities or spaces like community gardens and centres.

**"If you go to play football by yourself, or you go with your brother, then you meet others."**

There is a strong desire for additional activities in parks beyond expensive day festivals. Some young people remarked that these types of community events were more common in the past or in other parts of London but seem to have declined over time. Some mentioned that events would help them to feel more part of a community and get to know their neighbours better. Street parties and live music were the sort of community-focused events they would like to see.



**"Since moving to Islington back in August 2024, I haven't found much of a connection to the council, but when it comes to me being involved in the community myself. I try to look for events that are happening within the borough I try to attend those events, especially if it's to do with cultural events."**

Interestingly, many were keen for these activities to be multigenerational and not just aimed at young people:

**"You're connected by small little things, like last year, we all did a gadget workshop for elderly people."**

**"When there's an [Arsenal] match on, I feel like it really brings the community together and you always meet someone**

**new when you're sitting there and you always have a good interaction. That sense of community is something that's important."**

Second, they noticed that changes in street design – such as removing cars or adding benches – could help facilitate social interactions.

**"I think the architecture and infrastructure of the Arsenal stadium contributes to it. I quite like how the stadium's not just like on the road; I quite like how it's separate like cause it's then quite quiet up there."**

**"I don't know if you've had this type of interaction before, but sitting on a bench, someone's next to you and eventually [...] we end up speaking. It's like: I have never**

met this person before, and now we're here talking like we've been friends for years!"

When we asked young survey respondents what their predominant feeling was when walking around Islington's streets, the second most common emotion was 'unsafe', but the first was 'neutral'. We discussed this at length with our research team and decided that this could be interpreted as revealing a need for Islington's streets to become more lively, playful and engaging, to invite surprising, spontaneous interactions, rather than neutral transit through them.

This chapter sets out the complex landscape of young people's connections with their local communities in Islington. It has shown that young people find joy, safety, care and belonging from connecting with local people and they want social spaces to remain at the heart of the LNs programme, and the green transition more widely. Barriers to this span from systemic problems like cultures of individualism, the treadmill of study and work, and gentrification, to specific issues like street design and provision of community activities.



# Engagement

**Maddy Westhead,**  
young researcher

“When I first heard the term ‘liveable neighbourhoods’, it was as a part of the Islington Climate Panel. We had many educational sessions, helping to explain these kinds of terms, and gain a deeper understanding of what different projects were about. I heard of low-traffic neighbourhoods before, but not ‘liveable’ ones, and this shift of language intrigued me. Wondering if this was a purely political decision – to avoid negative association with the increasingly controversial and politicised LTNs – or if there might be more nuance to the scheme.

Being able to talk directly with those involved in the project helped me to understand that LNs are not just about speed limits and one-way systems, but about evolving our shared spaces into places that are better designed for social and ecological progress. I think that having a more direct kind of engagement – one that didn’t assume my knowledge and gave me space to ask questions – allowed me to deepen my understanding and invest more in the scheme.

Through this project, it has become increasingly clear to me that young people feel strongly disengaged in council affairs, despite 70% of young people expressing desires to be more involved in local decision-making. Conducting interviews and focus groups, we found that many young people had not heard of the LNs programme before our discussion. They lacked the basic knowledge to build their



engagement and relationship with LNs.

However, when we broke it down into smaller, more familiar aspects (asking about bike lanes or greening), there was much more enthusiasm. If terms like “liveable neighbourhoods” are going to be used, then there needs to be an educational awareness campaign alongside them. And in the case of young people, the effort needs to come from the larger institution of the council. If young people don’t know what LNs are, then they’re not going to care so much about them, and amid busy lives, they probably aren’t going to spend a lot of free time finding out.

By taking an active part in this project, I feel hopeful that Islington Council can support young people to begin to develop a greater sense of agency over the place in which they live, work or go to school. There is not an easy one-size-fits-all

approach to engaging young people – some young people want to see Islington Council on TikTok, others would rather have a chat with a councillor in a park or in their

school/workplace. A diverse portfolio of engagement strategies seems like the best possible way to meaningfully engage a wide spread of young people.”

Young people in Islington want to be more involved in shaping their borough, but many do not know how to engage with the council or feel confident that their voices will be heard. While they care deeply about their communities and the environment, they often feel disconnected from the decisions that affect their lives.

One clear takeaway from our research is that liveable neighbourhoods, as a framing of local climate action, appeal to young people. It is positive, accessible, and looks at the green transition holistically, in a way that resonates with young people. Young people want to hear about the relevance of the green transition to their everyday lives. This means that highlighting positive co-benefits of climate action (such as cycling being cheap and convenient) will help young people to connect with the green transition. Consciousness of the climate crisis was rarely the primary motivation for young people to make choices about how they live, travel around and spend time in the borough, as one young participant reflected:

“When I walk or cycle, I don’t think: ‘I’m doing this because it’s a green thing to do’. I do it mainly just because it’s the better way to get places.”

At the same time, many young people do want to engage with and learn about the local and global implications of the climate crisis. It’s less that climate shouldn’t be part of the discussion, and more that other elements of the green transition – like socio-economic and racial justice, mental health benefits, or green skills and jobs, could be given more prominence. .

## The value of engaging with local climate action

Young people expressed a strong desire to take action on climate. They had ideas, energy and a clear sense of what matters to them, from climate action to safer streets and more inclusive public spaces. However, many said they had never been asked for their views before or had only been involved in one-off consultations.

“I want to be involved in a long-term project. Like in a steering group or advisory group where young people are present. It would allow me to hear about the changes that are happening but also to give feedback.”

Some policymakers called for a similar structural change that would see young people having more of a say in how decisions are made in Islington:

“Why aren’t we having young people at the environment scrutiny meetings? Invite schools, give young people access to officers making decisions. Let them ask questions.”

## Barriers to engaging young people: awareness, time and scepticism

Our research identified several barriers that prevent young people from participating in local decision-making. First, there is a gap between interest and awareness of how to engage with the council. While 70% of young people responding to our survey said they want to be more involved in local decision-making, 38% said they do not know how to engage with the council. When asked how they would ideally like to engage with the council, many young people suggested activities and methods that are already on offer (such as workshops in local community centres and working with youth clubs). This suggests that communications about the council’s work are simply not reaching young people.

“I don’t think we know enough about what council does and that prevents us from being aware of what’s around us and finding the right solutions of what to do to make Islington better.”

The need for improved channels of communication also helps explain why young people were unfamiliar with the council’s work on climate and had never

heard of the LNs programme. Others said they lacked information about the climate risks facing Islington and how local action connects to global challenges.

A second major barrier to engagement is that young people lack the time and capacity to take part in activities around local climate action. Many did not see themselves living in Islington or London long term due to the expensive cost-of-living, despite wanting to. If young people are uncertain whether they’ll even be living in Islington in a few months’ time (due, for example, to the threat of rent hikes), then it becomes hard for them to connect to and invest in local places, communities and climate action.

Many young people are also balancing studies, work or caring responsibilities, making it difficult to attend meetings or events. Islington has tried to address this problem and is currently establishing a new reward and recognition policy, to help a diverse range of people to attend engagement activities. However, young people also raised the need for systemic shifts (for example, towards a shorter working week allowing more time for community engagement – something which came up recurrently in interviews and focus groups).

Others told us that the Council could feel quite distant from their everyday lives, and they felt unsure their input would lead to real change or be taken seriously. One young person who had taken part in the Islington Climate Panel said he’d felt that he’d been lucky to have the opportunity and wished it was accessible to more young people:

The climate panel, I think that was great – having those conversations publicly, integrating with the community, having the voice of actual residents heard. But the only

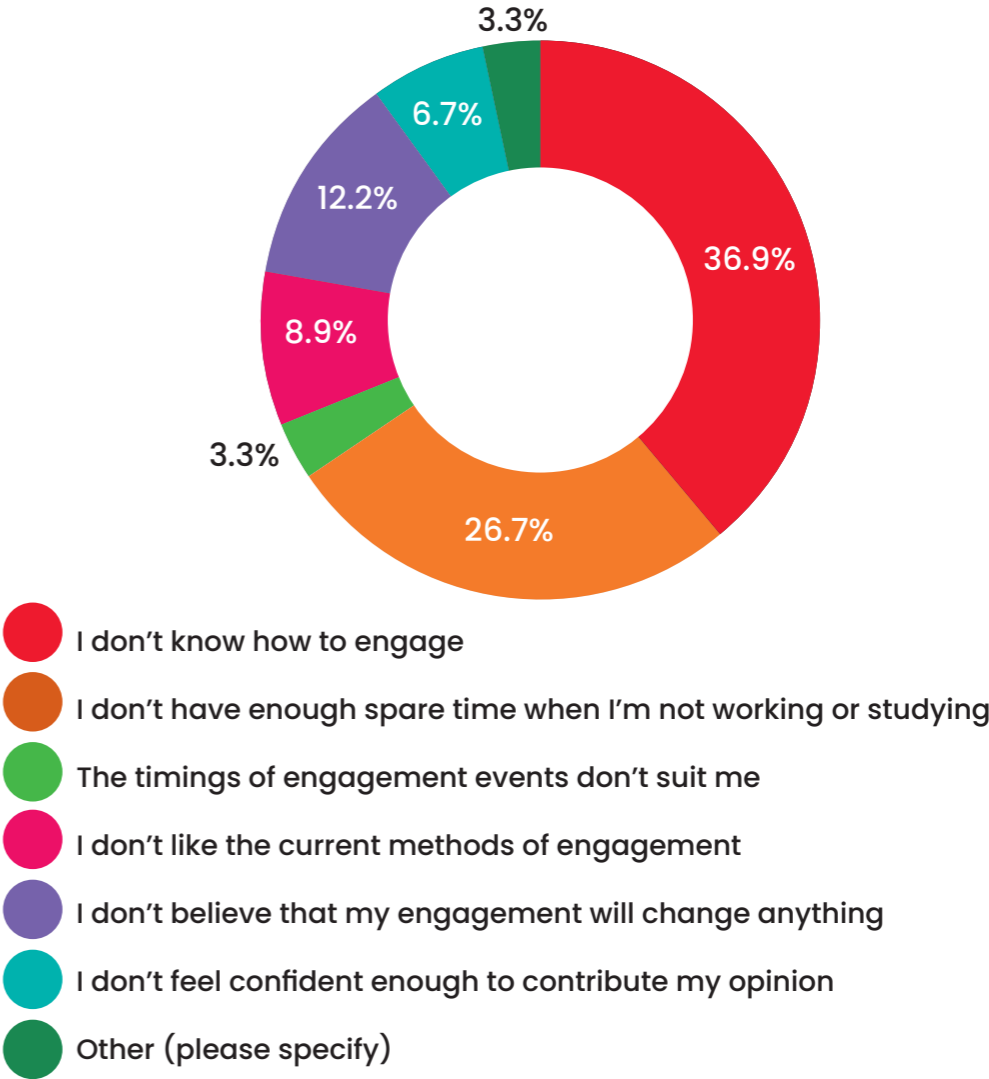
way I found out about it was by getting the letter in the post, and I feel like [...] a lot of people would have ignored it or not noticed it.

Concern about whether the current methods of engagement work for young people was echoed within Islington Council, one reflected:

“The methods the council uses for consultation and engagement are definitely not ideal for many groups in Islington, including young people. Letter drop-offs or posters on the street just don’t work.”

## ‘What prevents you from engaging with Islington Council?’

Figure 10



## Communicating better online

Digital platforms play a central role in how young people access information. According to the survey, social media and email newsletters were the preferred ways to be contacted about local opportunities. Platforms like TikTok and Instagram were seen as powerful tools for raising awareness and building community.

**“I was scrolling TikTok and Southwark Council came up on my ‘For You’ page. I spent a good half an hour on their page.”**

Islington Council is already beginning to explore these new channels, as Emlyn Bailey Strategic Campaigns Advisor from Islington Council said

**“We’re looking at platforms like TikTok, but obviously as a council there are concerns about security. Still, digital comms is a key channel – we’re living in a digital age.”**

Young people called for more creative, youth-led digital engagement using simplified language, visual content and relatable examples. They also suggested that the council should consider co-designing communications campaigns with young people to ensure they feel relevant and engaging. This ensures that the council is communicating to young people

in places they are more likely to go, and engage in the content, principally online, and to ensure that communication isn’t talking down to them, by using language that engages and inspires.

This research highlights a clear opportunity for the council to rethink how it engages young people. By investing in more targeted, creative and sustained forms of engagement, the council can build stronger relationships with young residents and ensure their voices help shape the future of the borough.

## Meeting young people where they are

Young people are more likely to engage when opportunities are brought to them in spaces they already use. Schools, youth clubs, universities and community events were all seen as effective entry points.

**“A good place to start would be schools and universities in Islington, because I think many young people there are quite passionate and interested in climate change and would be happy to have conversations like this with the council and share their ideas.”**

As one focus group participant shared:

**“If this focus group had been at the Town Hall, I probably wouldn’t have gone. But because it was here at Arsenal Hub, I stayed and took part. I felt comfortable, and I won’t forget your faces or that I had this conversation with the council.”**

Council staff also noted that meeting young people where they are is one of the most effective ways to build trust and participation. Micaela Linnane, Transport Projects Team Manager at Islington Council said:

**“An effective way of engaging with youth is to go where you can have quite a high number of people – like the Arsenal Hub or Chapel Market. Bring the surveys to them rather than expecting them to come to you.”**

In-person engagement was particularly valued when it felt informal, welcoming and community-based. Focus groups highlighted a strong desire for more face-to-face interaction and opportunities to connect with others in their neighbourhoods.

**“I want to be part of something that brings people together. That’s how you feel like you belong.”**

**“The key is to do live in-person events. I’m so tired of online. But when you have a space where people genuinely care about you, it’s very important.”**

Young people want more than one-off consultations. They want to be part of ongoing processes where they can see the impact of their contributions. This includes being involved in advisory panels, co-design projects (such as peer research), and long-term partnerships with the council. They want engagement to be more accessible, inclusive, and responsive to their needs. Longer-term, deeper programmes of engagement and education (including in how local government works and how to understand and tackle the systemic drivers of the climate crisis) can empower and upskill young people so they take ownership of local climate action and play increasingly active roles in the future.

Young people also want to see that their engagement has made a difference, by seeing their suggestions actioned and the results communicated back to them. Of course, change is often slow, and the green transition will not be delivered overnight, but it’s important to frame youth engagement around short-term goals so that young participants can see the impact of their work.

# Recommendations

The following recommendations were identified by the peer-research team and tested and refined with policymakers and other young people at a workshop.

Our young researchers identified a list of overarching principles useful to any council seeking to align its green transition policymaking with youth priorities. We also set out examples of how these translate to Islington Council specifically, although many ideas could be used by local authorities across London and beyond.

Some of these Islington-focused examples

speak to work that Islington Council already does or is set to do. We want to add our support to these schemes, to improve their visibility to young people, and to encourage a stronger emphasis on youth engagement and participation with them going forward.

These current schemes are marked in **red**, whereas recommendations for new activities or approaches are in **blue**.



## Recommendation 1

### Link the green transition to everyday realities of economic and social inequality in London

- Continue to use data to identify areas lacking green space when allocating new green infrastructure.
  - Continue to lobby for policy changes to improve housing affordability, including reforms to right-to-buy and rent control powers.
- 
- Connect the Liveable Neighbourhoods scheme with wider goals to address economic and social inequality. This means strengthening cross-council collaboration between teams working on housing, public health, inclusive economies and local green transitions.

## Recommendation 2

### Prioritise safety when designing neighbourhood transformations

- Ensure that new and existing LN projects explicitly focus on improving safety, in partnership with Community Safety teams.
- Invite young women and non-binary people to guide policymakers on walks around Islington to identify areas young people avoid and why, informing patrol routes and safety investments. Involve young people in shaping Islington's new transport strategy, with a focus on improving travel safety.

## Recommendation 3

### Make it safer to choose cycling

- Continue to roll out school streets in secondary schools, using co-design sessions to give young people ownership of changes.
  - Continue to install affordable bike hangars, ensure secure bike storage is accessible for all types of bikes.
  - Continue to create signage for cyclists highlighting cycleways and low-traffic routes to key destinations. .
- 
- Exchange with other boroughs on tackling bike theft, including collaboration with police on "bait bikes."
  - Situate new public bike locking stands in CCTV-covered areas.
  - Explore partnerships with electric bike companies to increase cycling safety and uptake in underrepresented groups.
  - Commence work with young women and girls on cycling safety, potentially partnering with VCS groups like Cycling Sisters.

## Recommendation 4

### Prioritise low cost or free bicycle provision for young people

- Continue to offer "Dr Bike" bike maintenance sessions in areas popular with young people.
  - Continue to support free cycling education, especially in areas with low cycling rates and for those nearing 18 (when the cost of public transport increases and cycling can seem especially affordable).
- 
- Explore ways to provide free or low-cost bikes to young people from low-income communities, including using unclaimed stolen bicycles recovered by the police.

## Recommendation 5

### Make it easier for young people to access green and social spaces

- Continue to invest in intergenerational programmes, working with Culture and Community Wealth Building teams to engage youth.
- 
- Explore how more free events like music and community activities can be hosted in green spaces and communicated effectively to young people.
  - Review private green space provision to assess potential for wider public access.
  - Incentivise Friends of the Park groups to include more young people by linking funding to youth engagement.

## Recommendation 6

### Improve green and social space provision all year-round

- Develop a "Winter Strategy" for green spaces, to understand how parks are used by young people during colder months. This would identify gaps in amenities like lighting, shelter, seating, or warm gathering areas.
- Work with young people to explore which features could improve winter experiences, and use insights from young people to guide investment in winter-friendly improvements, ensuring parks remain welcoming, safe, and inclusive year-round.

## Recommendation 7

### Meet young people where they are

- Continue to ensure young people are fairly compensated for participation, offering vouchers or food where payment isn't possible.
- Engage with young people in places they already spend time, like schools, youth clubs, cafés, and sports events.
- Work with schools and universities to explore and develop the potential of LNs and build support for climate action. Focus on “educating, not shaming” to build awareness and agency around climate action.

## Recommendation 8

### Co-design communication materials with young people

- Engage young people on co-designing youth-friendly communications, beginning with members of the Youth Council.
- Use creative methods like social media takeovers and co-produced videos to promote schemes like [Love Clean Streets](#), bike repair sessions, and bike hangar requests, or on issues such as preventing bike theft through proper locking and registration.

## Recommendation 9

### Frame climate action in terms of tangible benefits for young people

- Continue to communicate clearly and inclusively, avoiding jargon and using language that resonates with young people.
- Emphasise the cost-saving benefits of walking and cycling, 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

- Continue to work with schools to host sessions during climate week, Earth Day, and relevant local events.
- Work with schools to use Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) 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.
- Make the case for the GLA to roll out a climate risk education programme across London boroughs.



# Conclusions

## Conclusions

**Maryam Jimale,**  
young researcher

### Towards a just and youth-led green transition

“A key finding of the project was the disconnect between institutional ambitions and the everyday realities of young residents. While council members largely framed sustainability through infrastructure and policy, young people centred their concerns on accessibility, affordability and social equity. Although participants demonstrated a strong interest in climate-related issues, awareness of local climate policies and initiatives remained limited, pointing to a need for more accessible and targeted communication. Importantly, young people voiced a clear desire for



safer, greener streets and expressed enthusiasm for walking and cycling in Islington, particularly if routes felt inclusive, welcoming and community oriented. Above all, they called for meaningful involvement in local green transitions as active co-creators.”

The Rethinking Green Transitions project demonstrates a clear and urgent need for Islington Council to build on its commitment to youth engagement in local climate action. Young people’s desires for the future of their neighbourhoods are generally aligned with the vision of the Liveable Neighbourhoods programme. However, young people want these schemes to think more holistically about liveability, and particularly affordability, safety and social and economic inequality.

Despite interest in the topics that the LNs programme addresses such as greening and active travel, there remains a significant gap in youth engagement. Young people consistently showed that they are not apathetic; they are engaged, insightful and eager to contribute. However, they feel disconnected from a process that often fails to speak their language or address their most pressing concerns.

A core message of this research is that the green transition cannot succeed if it is pursued in isolation from the fight for social and economic justice. Issues of safety, affordability and community are not secondary to environmental goals; they are foundational to them. A cycle lane is only useful if people feel safe enough to use it. A park is only beneficial if it feels welcoming to all. A climate policy is only effective if the people it is meant to serve can afford to prioritise it.

Islington Council has an opportunity to develop a new model of youth engagement – one that is proactive, sustained and genuinely collaborative, working with young people in the borough as designers and messengers of new approaches. It must meet young people where they are, value their expertise and provide them with real opportunities to shape their futures.

By embracing the recommendations in this report, the council would not only help deliver a more effective and equitable green transition but foster a new generation of active, engaged citizens, who will help to drive forward its work. As this project has shown, when young people are given a meaningful platform, they can be powerful agents of change.

We will leave you with a collage created by the young researchers when they were imagining Islington's greener future, and

an extract from an early interview. Whilst we must always bear in mind our young participants' insistence that improving street space alone is not enough to make a neighbourhood liveable, we can also see that such local interventions can transform young people's experiences of their surroundings and ways of life:

**Young researcher:** So close your eyes and imagine just travelling down your local high street. What do you feel like? What do you notice?

**Interviewee:** Gloomy. I don't know why. I see everyone's in their own zone. Walking, minding their own business, looking stressed, coming from work. Tired. Exhausted.

**Young researcher:** Okay and now imagine your ideal high street. What do you see?

**Interviewee:** I'll say... switch up to the opposite. Make it nice: bright lights, benches and people interacting with each other. They come in and sit down, just to have a little rest on the way to the bus stop. Or just two friends, just sitting there, bickering or what not. Yeah, that's what I'll see: more lights, more trees – make it brighter in the community instead of it looking dull with just everyone in their own road. Give them a reason to sit down and have a chat, instead of just rushing on.



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