

Note of XR Greenwich Climate Breakdown Shakedown panel discussion with Greenwich Councillors, 12 May 2020

Greenwich Council's decarbonisation plans - how can we give them teeth?

Simon Pirani (fossil fuel researcher & historian, Oxford University), chair
Councillor Denise Scott-McDonald
Councillor David Llewellyn Gardner
Andrew Pendleton (New Economics Foundation)
Chloe Jeffries (Manchester Climate Emergency)

1. Summary of action points

- DS-M to take back to colleagues XR's request that the whole council should come out publicly against Silvertown Tunnel and actively oppose it, together with other local councils. See our separate letter with the reasons for this - especially the way the COVID pandemic has shown how it's possible to make rapid modal transport shifts, and how it's highlighted the links between poverty, ill-health and air pollution.
- DLG to find out whether there's a force majeure clause / a way of putting the brakes on the Silvertown contract.
- XR to keep up Silvertown pressure.
- DS-M to take the idea of alternate parking (one side of street) to her transport team.
- Council to make post-COVID road use changes now, before things go back to normal.
- XR to play active role in pursuing post-COVID street measures.
- DS-M to engage with SELCE to discuss one-stop shop for energy efficiency.
- DS-M or DLG to follow up point that council paper is over-reliant on EVs and this isn't matched by investment in rooftop solar and other renewable energy sources.
- DLG and XR and other groups to work together on how to spend £2m for green spaces.
- Leila to provide DS-M with information about the Collective Investment Vehicle.
- XR / Janet Stott to monitor council's divestment plans.
- DLG and DS-M to pursue AP's point about investment in productive borough assets (the plan is thin on this).

- DLG and DS-M to take back to council XR's suggestions of a Greenwich Citizens' Assembly (which would further DS-M's point about involving long-standing green campaigners who don't engage online) and a SAGE-type group of local experts.
- XR to monitor council's engagement on carbon plan and provide further input; get involved in processes when key relevant decisions are made. 'Hold feet to fire.'
- XR to consider internally what lessons to learn from MCE's work - e.g. giving councillors short briefing notes before meetings.
- Greenwich Council to decide whether to press for 2050 LES carbon target to be brought forward, and for London Plan's target of 35% reduction embedded carbon to be increased
- DS-M to share her slides, please, some of which aren't in the report online.
- Simon P to forward unanswered questions to Denise and David, whose responses will be disseminated.

2. Presentations

DS-M presented slides on the Council's plan to become carbon neutral by 2030. In London 26 councils have declared a climate emergency, most going for 2030 target. Greenwich declared emergency last June and has commissioned a 100-page report. This recommends actions such as reducing vehicle trips by 45%. Two biggest contributors to Greenwich carbon emissions are domestic energy and transport.

Three main areas for action are buildings, transport, and other stuff e.g recycling. External policy from City Hall and government is important e.g. can ULEZ become ZEZ. Lots of decisions needed. Council governance structure has been set up with cabinet members and an official from each council work area. External stakeholders' cooperation is needed for many decisions. A Climate Change Network has been set up for local people & organisations to get involved.

DLG praised XR's role. He's passionate about environmental issues. Labour councils are blazing a trail e.g. Bristol, Oxford, Leeds, Birmingham. Ken Livingstone set up C40 Cities group - when national governments fail, cities have to lead. London Environment Strategy's target of zero carbon by 2050 needs revisiting. By 2050 London should have best air quality of any world city - great shame Sadiq Khan has committed to Silvertown Tunnel. Draft London Plan will inform much of local council actions, from planning application responses to writing own strategy. Status of metropolitan land now same as green belt land, but plan is weak on greening development. Urban Greening Factor sets ratios for new developments around factors such as air quality and carbon. We may want to press to increase ratios. (Bristol's are much higher.) Is 35% embedded carbon reduction target ambitious enough? Relevant for Silvertown tunnel concrete use. Council is very clear that COVID is an opportunity, with climate emergency at heart of COVID response - embed sustainable transport and way of life.

AP said we must open up the political space on climate emergency, lots of ground to make up. Estimate for 2020 carbon emissions is they'll reduce around 5.5% globally because of COVID. Need to reduce 7.5% a year to hit 1.5 degrees. Lack of structural change means that emissions may go up again fast. Link with inequality. COVID gives us a brief window of opportunity. E.g. aviation: government airport expansion plans would have increased passenger numbers by nearly 100% (2005-2050), way way beyond what UK watchdog Committee on Climate Change (CCC) wants. But reduced demand needs government intervention. Challenge is the pace of reduction - UK can only emit 3 gigatonnes to meet 2050 target (setting aside whether 2050 is right target). Even 10% reduction a year would bust this by mid 2030s. Only if we go really fast now can we hope. Really bad news, as CCC says, is lack of UK policy framework. 2023-27 we'll drift off track because of this. E.g. no zero carbon homes policy (government got rid of it). Local authorities can do loads but elephant in room is massive road network expansion through Silvertown Tunnel. New roads = new traffic. No way will electric vehicles solve this. We must reduce traffic and switch modes.

The critical thing for Greenwich Council to do is target the tunnel. What else can the council do? Literally today you can take road space now, quick, while it's there. Introduce filters to stop rat running. Take space on main roads too. Don't be timid now, don't miss this opportunity. Impressive that Greenwich has set an ambitious target but must be really ambitious in acting now.

CJ presented a case study of how campaigners can scrutinise council actions on climate change. MCE are non-partisan group pushing for council actions. Manchester has long standing large Labour majority. Hit by austerity. Heavily dependent on airport income to finance front-line services - is large shareholder. Long history of attempts to 'lead the way' on climate change but often soon forgotten. Declared climate emergency July 2019, approved 5-year action plan March 2020.

What's gone well - input of supporters in many ways, not just meetings. Volunteer researchers undertake defined tasks for briefings and reports. Work with other campaign groups to produce templates and responses e.g. for consultation on the local plan. Detailed reports, including quarterly assessments of council's progress against its climate emergency declaration using a mix of scrape data and FOI requests. Short briefing papers for council meetings with 3-4 recommendations, sent to councillors a few days before. Have influenced councillors' contributions at meetings and quality of output - e.g. precision of data and costings, introduction of quarterly progress reporting.

What's gone less well - not all reports get traction. MCE has its own success metrics not only about influencing council decisions but also spreading skills, knowledge and training in issues and local democracy to help citizens engage. Beginners' guides to local government. Next few months are crunch time scrutinising response to COVID. Mustn't let high profile changes obscure lower profile but crucial stuff. Openness is important too - because of COVID, meetings have been delayed for months or decisions taken by CEO.

3. Discussion

a) Silvertown Tunnel

Ferdi Suleyman: Post-COVID, we'll have transport over-capacity and TfL is hugely in debt - surely the council should call for a moratorium? Come out and join other councils in opposing the tunnel.

Denise S-M: Long journey of council changing its position. Tough one - expensive to stop the tunnel now. PFI project, signed off by Secretary of State. Nothing wrong with us asking London Mayor again. Can definitely take it back for internal discussion. Her successor in the transport job will need to engage.

David LG: Tunnel a disaster, there should be no new roads anywhere, funds should be diverted to living streets and sustainable travel. Agree Greenwich should join with other councils and speak out. TfL would incur big penalties if pulled out. They are on brink of financial collapse but can't save money cancelling the tunnel. But what if they put a brake on? We need to look at the fine print and work together to convince TfL and Mayor it's totally inconsistent with his Environmental Strategy, Transport Strategy, the London Plan and climate emergency. Khan holds to view that it will improve air quality which we know is not even proven by TfL evidence. We need to keep up pressure; the more from XR the better.

Q: Force majeure clause in contract?

AP: Councils have lots of problems with long term contracts that are now incompatible with climate targets. Remember the sunk cost fallacy! Stop, it'll cost public purse still more if you go on. Even if PFI, the public costs of facilitation and health impacts and air pollution are huge. Much cheaper to get out of contract.

b) Transport policy

Robin Stott: Let's seize the chance to make all Greenwich streets 1-way, parking 1 side only, use space for walking, cycling, trees, kids - lots of health and community benefits.

Denise: Agree must seize opportunity now, concerned more people already driving. Data shows speeding a risk in 1-way streets, so care needed. Trees yes. Alternate parking is great idea, will take that back to transport team.

Q: why is Greenwich so slow - other boroughs are already taking action?

Denise: We have set up a task force, looking at pinch points, taking suggestions. Can act quickly on projects already consulted on. Looking for TfL funding for some projects. Have been a bit slow but coming soon e.g. school streets and Greenwich town centre.

David: Statement on council's website today. Taking out parking spaces in town centre and widening pavements. What makes a difference is local people presenting petitions and questions at meetings e.g. Highways Committee. The more XR can get involved in local action to get streets closed or 1-way the better. All roads except bus routes should be no through roads.

SELCE: Electric vehicles (EVs) are not low carbon unless charged by renewables e.g. rooftop solar. Their carbon lifecycle can be worse than some non-EVs. Reliance on EVs in council's paper is not matched by rooftop solar ambition. People will just buy electric suvs and not change transport modes.

DLG: EVs halve emissions but not if include lifecycle costs. Worse mistake is to think EVs are a panacea, then people will stay on roads in their comfort zone. But there will be essential journeys: deliveries and tradespeople should use EVs. Council must make its own fleet electric and encourage businesses to use EVs, cargo bikes etc.

DS-M: agree that paper needs looking at again on solar / EVs - good point.

CJ: MCE has just blogged on EVs not saving us, useful summary of the case.

Energy

South East London Community Energy (SELCE) representative: Council paper mentions 1-stop shop for energy efficiency & renewable heat - great but dismayed because SELCE has been doing this for years! Progress slow, on a shoestring. Does council want to work with us or compete?

DS-M: Not competitive, SELCE does very good work, so No - will engage with SELCE to find out more about things. Not her portfolio.

Natural assets

Helen: key topic areas in report don't include natural assets - but these have a major role in stabilizing and reducing carbon emissions and contributing to good life in the city. Who is going to be driving this work forward?

Laurence Pinturault: In Greenwich ancient woodlands, anti-social behaviour including serious motorbike scrambling damage - what is council doing?

Denise: Natural assets left out because report focuses on things we can measure for 2030 target. Woodlands - awful. Council team works with police on this, needs more detail.

DLG: We've set up a new safer spaces team, mostly for town centre but parks too (there are 95!). Police have stopped some abuse. Friends groups and wilding help a lot. We have agreed £2m medium term to upgrade parks and green spaces. Want to work with XR and other groups on how to spend. He wants more pocket parks.

Housing

Laurence: How are we measuring carbon footprint? Why isn't the carbon cost of construction included?

David LG: With the draft London plan, new developments will have to take account of embedded emissions as well as energy efficiency. Planning board will need to look at this and we will have to press developers. Cllr Dillon is here - he is on the

planning board. Biggest issue we face in Greenwich is homelessness and overcrowding.

Divestment / investment

Janet Stott: what about divesting from carbon intensive companies and investing in renewables?

David: Last year the council adopted new principles for the investment fund including sustainability, child labour etc. Still a way to go using our pension holdings to ask right questions and work with other ethical investors to get policy changes. Bad investment recently to have money in hydrocarbons!

Denise: Janet please keep an eye on it. Pension fund committee will report soon.

Leila Mimmack: Collective Investment Vehicle where boroughs are pooling money is hosting a sustainable, fossil free equity exclusion fund. Lambeth council has invested £200m. Greenwich council was saying if you get us a fund we'll invest - now there is one - when will you?

Denise: that's great - would send a very strong signal - will look into it. Many councillors want to do more on this.

AP: Massive opportunity for councils to invest in productive assets in their own boroughs. E.g. social housing stock (homes must be affordable as well as zero carbon); renewable energy investments that pay back. Probably over time such assets are more reliable than capital markets.

Denise: Good point!

Jobs

G Browning: Let's retrain all the jobless for environmental and social work - on lines of Labour's Green New Deal. Let's look innovatively e.g. at diverse forms of transport - e.g. minibuses for people who can't walk or cycle. It happened with small firms being flexible moving to make PPE.

Daniella Vega: why carbon neutral not zero? How much offsetting

[These 2 points were not answered]

Consultation / engagement

Karen Janody: Consultation on decarbonisation plan is delayed because of lockdown. Can the council start it digitally in the next week or two? It's a springboard for a more ambitious process - Greenwich could lead but needs scrutiny. How about a Citizens' Assembly to examine, take responsibility for and feed back on your plan?

Denise: We want feedback but COVID is top priority now. Some staff are self isolating and most remote working. Sorry can't say that will happen. Tiny team

working on carbon plan are trying to continue with the paperwork but engagement is problematic. We are looking at online. Long term environmental campaigners are not all online; need to work with them too.

CJ: Monitoring of processes is very important to stop slippage. Big discrepancies in how local authorities are moving ahead. Do get in touch for good practice examples. Keep monitoring, list dates, if processes and consultations have not moved online ask why and when.

Simon: COVID crisis won't be over for ages, we need to think in terms of interconnecting crises.

Fiona Moore: How about SAGE-type committee of experts, it could take forward this conversation and advise council on how best to increase ambition.

David LG (on chat): Good idea.

Wrap-up

CJ: It's not a competition between local authorities, different ones will try out different things, let's all learn from each other on best practice.

AP: Citizen action is key. Collaboration between LAs is critical, especially in absence of clear national planning on climate emergency. Hugely encouraging to see local plans, you have to break the leash and act yourselves, not wait for national leadership. Citizens' Assemblies can give local authorities valuable support and advice.

DLG: Very valuable discussion. In Friends of the Earth ranking of local authorities, Greenwich was 2nd or 3rd. Your input and your and others' pressure is really important to hold our feet to the fire. Big change recently; Greenwich now far more attuned. DLG will continue to champion living streets and climate emergency action. Resources are very overstretched especially with COVID and revenue streams are down - investments must make sense and reduce future spending. Crucial point is how action will help the most vulnerable, tackling large health and income inequalities in our borough of two halves. Look forward to seeing you all at council meetings, highways committee etc.

DS-M: Conversation must include people in Greenwich who don't see a climate emergency but e.g. a knife crime emergency. We are still battling Victorian London problems of poverty, health, pollution etc. Must tackle inequality and create jobs which must be part of green revolution. Must make Greenwich a better place to live. Simon: we hope to be part of the continued conversation. Next meeting 22 June. International climate talks process and cooperation / social justice with Asad Rehman, director of War on Want. More meetings July & August.

(ends)